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## EPOCHAL CHANGES, 1989–91

The term “*Wende*” (German for “turnaround”) was first coined by East German communist leader Egon Krenz; the term has since prevailed in everyday speech—at least in the new federal states of Germany (*die neuen Bundesländer*; the GDR areas re-established as states in 1990)—for denoting the political changes that took place in Europe from 1989 to 1991. Rarely has a world-revolutionizing process such as the collapse of the communist dictatorships in this period and the resulting global political change been connected with such an easygoing, non-descriptive term. Its use seems even stranger if one is reminded that the same term was used during the 1982 change of government in West Germany, when there was also talk of a *Wende*, with Helmut Kohl asserting his intention to bring about a “*geistig-moralische Wende*” (a mental/spiritual-moral turnaround). If the term *Wende* is appropriate for such a process, then it is clearly inappropriate for the epochal caesura of 1989–91, especially since other democratic changes in the German government, for instance the change from a grand coalition to a social-liberal coalition in 1969, have been characterized by the much more weighty word “*Machtwechsel*” (change of power).

### I.

Historical-political language is revealing; in this case, it reveals the surprising inability of many contemporaries to grasp the historical magnitude of the events they have lived through. Historians experience this time and again: being a contemporary is anything but a source of historical understanding. On the other hand, the use of appropriate terminology is a means for comprehension. I thus consider the term “revolution” more appropriate for describing epochal upheaval. I venture to state this, even though each of the modern revolutions—in England in 1688, in North America in 1776, in France in 1789, in many European states in 1848–49, in Russia in 1917 as well as in Germany and Austria in 1918–19—had their own particular causes and followed different courses.

Historiography and sociology have provided many definitions and interpretations regarding the phenomenon of modern revolutions. Formal criteria are decisive in this context, not fuzzy political or ethical assessments that make revolution a dream for some and a nightmare for others. Part of the formal characteristics of a historical-sociological definition of revolution is the interruption of political and social development, including the destruction of the existing political and consti-

tutional system—in this sense revolutions are always “illegal.” This is so because they question the legitimacy of the existing state and call for a new legality to replace it. Successful revolutions then face the problem of gaining the respect of the population for the newly created order by making it seem legitimate, and the order of the *ancien régime* illegitimate. This is usually a long-term process, the success of which ultimately also depends on the economic performance of new policies designed to improve the material situation of the population.

In addition to these medium- and long-term components of successful revolutions, the immediate victory is a change of the political system and culture. This also always entails a change of elites, although this change does not necessarily have to be absolute; indeed, a new revolutionary ruling elite can contain members of earlier functional elites. Examples during the French Revolution of 1789 include Count Mirabeau or the former bishop Talleyrand. If a change of system and elites does not occur, as for instance in the case of the revolutions in the states of the German Confederacy in 1848–49, the revolution does not have an immediate success. Nonetheless, such revolutions may have medium- or long-term repercussions. For example, despite the lack of success in 1848–49, the essential topics and goals of the constitutional debates of the German Paulskirche constitutional assembly in Frankfurt remained on the agenda of German politics, and it did not even take a generation for them to be realized by Bismarck in 1871, albeit not by means of a revolution.

Usually revolutions consist of or are at least connected to prolonged, both temporally and procedurally, transformation processes, since social structural change cannot be implemented in single, individual actions. This is already clear by the fact that revolutionary eruptions are preceded by ongoing crises of varying lengths. Usually the exchange of political elites also takes place unevenly; only rarely does the first tier of revolutionary elites remain in power permanently. While the statement, the revolution “devours its own children,”<sup>1</sup> need not be understood in a literal or murderous sense, in general it is accurate.

The question thus arises whether a revolution must necessarily be violent or require victims. While revolutionary systemic changes are often violent, this is not always the case. There were different patterns even between the various “revolutions” in Eastern and East Central Europe that occurred from 1989 to 1991, seen for instance in the different courses taken by the revolutions in the GDR and in Romania.

It is more difficult to define content. For instance, is a fundamental change of the economic order characteristic of revolutions, as suggested by Marxist revolutionary theory? The answer is no, since this was neither the case during the American Revolution of 1776, nor during the German Revolution of 1918–19. Nonetheless, it is true for the 1989–91 revolutions. And still more difficult is to answer the question whether large-scale national revolutions inevitably result in

<sup>1</sup> Georg Büchner, *Dantons Tod* (1835), act I.

a fundamental change of the international system. While the rationale behind national revolutions generally does not aim at this goal, nonetheless revolutions in large states almost always exert a lasting influence on international policy. While this was not true for the English Revolution of 1688, which was primarily a constitutional revolution in a single country, it was certainly true for the American Revolution of 1776 and even more so for the French Revolution, which between 1789 and 1815 turned the entire European state system of the *ancien régime* upside-down. Also in the case of the Russian October Revolution of 1917 this occurred, although here the effects of this type were more indirect and long-term. Also the overthrowing of the communist dictatorships from 1989 proved to be not just a chain of national revolutions, but was connected to the end of the Cold War and of the bipolarization of the world, thus becoming a fundamental revolution of the international system and the postwar world order that had been created from 1945.

There is much to suggest that the epochal caesura of 1989–91 has changed or altered our idea of revolutions in general. This concept will be examined in the present article.

The events of 1989–91 have shown contemporaneous historians the degree to which errors can be made: one only knows the history of something if one knows how it ends. Before 1989, it was not known that communism would fall, that the structures of the postwar era would change, that Germany would be reunited—any statements regarding these topics remained hypothetical. Many errors in the assessment of the GDR, not only by politicians and journalists, but also by scholars, stemmed from the fact that they were basing their ideas on an unknown future. Many supposed “experts” not only misjudged the true character of the GDR regime and its economic weaknesses, they also trusted manipulated statistics and ultimately underestimated the discontent of the population. Simultaneously, they overestimated the potential for development within the communist dictatorships. They thus proved to be poor diagnosticians as well as illusionary prognosticators. Today we know that reformist communism never had a chance in Europe. We should therefore be cognizant of the fact that we, too, do not know the end of the history of which we are the contemporaries.

What conclusions can be drawn from these considerations? Epochal caesuras such as the one in 1989–91 change perspectives, not just our perspective of the future, but also our perspective of the past. Complex historical structures and situations are never as univocal as they often appear to contemporaries; their layers can be exposed only gradually, with increasing distance and historical experience.

Some well-known examples can demonstrate this: The over-simplistic interpretation of 8 May 1945 as the day of “Liberation”—as celebrated since about 1985 by politicians, journalists and large segments of the German population—exhibits a limitation not only in the West-German perspective, but also the German viewpoint as a whole. Many Poles consider 27 January 1945 merely the date

of the liberation of Auschwitz; only 1989 was the year of liberation for the entire country. Thus the end of World War II is not so much put into a different perspective by the caesura of 1989–91, it becomes a clearer one. For most contemporaries, an adequate historical appraisal and a degree of insight only become possible after some time has passed. As is true for the year 1949—the year that the division of Germany gained constitutional, albeit not international legal structure—a teleological interpretation would also not do justice to 1989–91.

After 1945, the division of Germany, Europe, and the world deepened increasingly. The longer it lasted, the less an end to the division was considered possible. And yet the signs that the world would not remain the same increased during the 1970s, and still more during the 1980s. Evidence of this can be seen in the following:

- The CSCE conferences of the 1970s, with the famous “Basket III” of the Helsinki Final Act of 1975, which put pressure on the Eastern bloc states in the area of human and civil rights; the regimes seemed to have underestimated the repercussions of these treaties at home.
- NATO’s Double-Track Decision in December 1979, which forced the Soviet Union to modernize and increase its economic output;
- Solidarność in Poland;
- Problems with different rising nationalistic interests and increasing pressure toward reform in the Soviet Union, leading to Gorbachev’s glasnost and perestroika in the mid-1980s: as recognized already by Alexis de Tocqueville, the most dangerous moment for a bad system of government is the moment reforms are begun.
- The dissolution of Yugoslavia, which, in hindsight, began soon after Tito’s death in 1980.

History was accelerating. When events piled up in 1989–91, history changed its rhythm.

## II.

The collapse of the communist dictatorships in Europe did not only end an era of totalitarian ideologies in Europe; their demise also demonstrated the failure of hopes for the future founded on historico-philosophical concepts, and the collapse of utopian counter-proposals for society and economies. The brief attempts to revive Lenin as a focus for communist hopes of salvation after the final de-masking of Stalin as a mass-murdering dictator, already begun in 1956 at the twentieth congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union by Khrushchev, never had a chance: Lenin was seen as the originator of the Bolshevik system of terror. He was also toppled from his pedestal and Leningrad once again became Saint Petersburg.

In Western Europe, the weak attempts of self-immunization—attempts to circumvent the historical experience and to construct an “ideal,” and thus true, socialism to replace the now indefensible “real” socialism—remained limited to a few intellectual circles. Such constructions, which reduce the world to a mere idea, are indeed unshakable; there are simply some premises that will always suit theory, but never work in practice.

### III.

Since 1989–91 it is once again possible to compare, in an unbiased manner, the communist and National Socialist dictatorships, as well as the common elements in these regimes’ totalitarian rule. As a by-product of the Cold War, for more than two decades a comparative analysis of totalitarian rule was dismissed by the majority of historians and political scientists working in their respective fields, as well as large sections of the general public. Comparing dictatorships was considered “right wing,” but it is unclear why this was so. Today, comparisons are even made by those who, before 1989, considered the mere question of whether there were any similarities objectionable.

Stalin, who, like Mussolini, gained power in 1922, and Hitler, who achieved it in 1933, are now recognized as the twentieth century’s two poles of personified inhumanity. This is based on the terrorist techniques of their rule, their unscrupulousness, the degree and atrociousness of their crimes, and finally their striving for hegemony charged with ideological fanaticism and personality cults. Flanked by these two figures, the states of Central and Eastern Europe were crushed. Indeed, the comparison still stands, despite the differences between Stalin’s cautious foreign policy and Hitler’s “all or nothing” mentality, which became apparent when National Socialist Germany broke the Hitler-Stalin Pact in June 1941 by attacking the Soviet Union and waging an unprecedented war of ideological and racist annihilation to eradicate Bolshevism and subjugate the entire country to gain so-called *Lebensraum*, space to live, in Eastern Europe.

The comparison also does not weaken in view of the fact that the two dictatorships exhibited antithetic and hostile ideologies, or that their respective crimes were different regarding motives and victims. These facts do not cancel the analogy of dictatorial rule and their historical reciprocity. Of course, these insights do not allow their acts to be relativized in an ethical sense or allowed an apologia in the political sense. Neither dictatorship justifies the other, despite their complicated interconnection: cooperating for a period of time but then mortal enemies. Rather, there are two levels of reasoning.

Comparing these has repeatedly led to controversy. By relying on reciprocal causality and the respective specific conditions of the genesis periods, a comparative interpretation proceeds historiographically: it “historicizes” its object of inquiry.

For political–moral reasons stemming from the present, the opposing position fears historicizing comparisons of this sort, falsely believing that they equalize the two sides and thus, (in some way) are hazardous for the national educational narrative: they are not interested in historical “understanding” (although this in no way means exculpation), classification, and analysis. In contrast, the critics of comparison consider it necessary to continually invoke Germany’s Nazi past to prevent a “suppression” of the past in the collective consciousness of the present—which would of course not only be politically problematic, but morally reprehensible.

Naturally, suppression is the antipode of any historiographical examination of the past, inasmuch there is no debate. It is just as irrefutable that in the Federal Republic of Germany democracy was developed as a learning process focusing on the past. Maintaining an awareness of its historical legacy has stabilized democracy in Germany, immunized it against nationalism, and eased the Federal Republic’s European path. However, this has simultaneously required the much heralded—yet oft ridiculed and nevertheless fundamental—anti-totalitarian consensus of all the democratic parties of the early Federal Republic. Still, the following holds true: while historiography provides insights that must be used for political education today, this form of learning is always an indirect process. In a way, it is a by-product. Like all forms of scholarly enquiry, historiography must focus on its subject—which lies in the past and not in the present.

Once again it becomes clear that the struggle between totalitarian dictatorships and liberal democracies upholding the rule of law, which characterized the twentieth century in Europe, was not decided in 1945, but only in 1989–91. With regard to contemporary history, this enhances our understanding decisively. However, as part of this new understanding, Germany must transcend its egocentrism. The problem of historical legacy has a different meaning for Germany than for its neighbors. To be more exact: The Germans have to deal responsibly with the experience of two, albeit different, dictatorships during the twentieth century.

The neighboring states that, until 1945, were victims of Nazi Germany then lived for the next forty-five years—that is, for a generation and a half—in a collective state of presuming their innocence with regard to their own postwar history. Their democracy and rule of law will also remain wanting if they do not face their own history objectively. I do not refer here only to acts toward German minorities, but also to the consequences of the communist dictatorships in the areas of domestic, social, moral and economic policy. The fact that these other questions remain open is, for instance, demonstrated by the ever recurring discussions about the Beneš decrees in the Czech Republic. All in all, mass expulsions, including those of the Germans, have been recognized as a trait of the twentieth century. Even if their historical consequences have been overcome, they remain a historical topic that is repeatedly revived. But it will not be endlessly possible to divide up history and select pieces of it—positive or negative—that just happen to be useful in the current situation.

Thus, since 1989–91 the different national pasts have become relevant again, sometimes in an intensified form. The collapse of communism has also made it possible to properly analyze its historical assessment and its role in Europe and the world, not only because many sources have become accessible, but also because we know how it ended. *Le passé d'une illusion* (The Passing of an Illusion) is the fitting title of a book published in 1995 by the great French historian François Furet,<sup>2</sup> who himself changed from being a communist to being a liberal after the Soviet repression of the Hungarian Revolution in 1956. Furet could only write this work about twentieth century communism after its collapse and after seeing the devastation it caused. This is also true of *The Black Book of Communism*, edited by Stéphane Courtois, which, despite some shortcomings, has its merits.<sup>3</sup> It is indicative that, while such publications enjoyed great success in Germany, comparable works of this sort were not written there.

#### IV.

Until 1989, the division of Germany seemed to be a clear consequence of the barbarism spread by the Nazi dictatorship across Europe, its defeat in World War II, as well as the subsequent ideological partition of the world into spheres of influence. The fundamental opposition during the twentieth century between democracy and despotism seemed to be firmly installed on German soil. The fissure went right through the nation itself; Germany's central position in Europe was dissolved into a bisection and its resulting Western and Eastern integration. The two constituent states ended all German *Sonderwege*—the German “special path” that had struck dread into its European neighbors—through their integration into the opposing blocs.

The historians who had prematurely tossed the concept of nation and nation state onto the ash heap of history were shown the opposite by the ethnic conflicts of the 1980s, and then by the events following 1989. Although the reunified Germany has not restored the traditional nation state due to its being embedded in Europe, it is also not a post-nation state, something we became accustomed to during the period of two German states. Obviously this question requires deeper consideration.

The suppression of the right to self-determination for dozens of different peoples for seventy years by Bolshevik rule in the Soviet Union was obviously incapable of permanently suppressing these various nationalities. In the Balkans, a

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<sup>2</sup> François Furet, *The Passing of an Illusion: The Idea of Communism in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

<sup>3</sup> Stéphane Courtois, Nicolas Werth, Jean-Louis Panné, Andrzej Paczkowski, Karel Bartosek and Jean-Louis Margolin, *The Black Book of Communism: Crimes, Terror, Repression* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999).

situation surprisingly analogous to the period just before World War I returned. Two states emerged from the territory of former Czechoslovakia. And efforts to achieve autonomy are also still being observed in Western democracies, sometimes even as forms of terrorism such as in the Spanish Basque Country.

Obviously most of the diverse models tested in the twentieth century to solve nationality problems have failed: This is true for historically developed forms of organization such as the multiethnic Habsburg Monarchy, for new political formations such as the multiethnic state of Czechoslovakia in the inter-war period and after 1945, as well as for the Versailles system since 1919. It is just as true for the Soviet repression of peoples and countries—in which internationalist socialism sometimes combined with Russian imperialism—as for the racist *Lebensraum* politics of the Nazi regime, with its enslavement of entire peoples. Obviously since the 1980s we are seeing a situation of re-nationalization, especially within the Soviet Union as well as its successor and former satellite states.

## V.

We have reached the point where we should move from discussing the mixture between problems of the past and those of the present and future, as treated above, and instead to examine the main concrete results of the caesura of 1989–91.

Can the domestic and foreign policy of the peoples and new states that liberated themselves from the Soviet grip and communist domination be discerned? While the national movements since the nineteenth century usually involved a symbiosis of national emancipation, increasing constitutionalization, parliamentarization and finally democratization of government, thus connecting nation building with modernization, today this type of symbiosis is evident in only some of the former Eastern bloc states and Soviet republics. National emancipation from Soviet hegemony did not necessarily bring about equal rights for minorities. The restoration of the smaller states did not inevitably entail a thorough democratization, which has been a general weakness of many newly established states, as for instance Belarus or Ukraine, or solve the complex problems in the Caucasus region, of which Chechnya is only the best-known example. In this context, it is unclear whether smaller minorities possess the necessary energy to achieve viable statehood.

In other words: Large regions are far from being consolidated. The destabilization of domestic and foreign policy caused by the disintegration of the Soviet Union generated developments that have not yet been concluded.

In contrast, the democratization of state and society has progressed much more decisively in the East Central European states that are not a part of the CIS, although former communists in reform-socialist successor parties have taken political office surprisingly often. Paradoxically, they have usually striven to implement a free market and thus, an anti-socialist economic system. As have



the Germans, they have discovered that cleaning up forty-five years of debris will take at least a generation. Indeed, during communist rule many states did not even manage to clear away all of the damage of the war. The continued activity of persons involved in the final reformist phases of individual communist regimes has not necessarily meant that they have continued their political aims through other means. Hungary and, in a complex manner, Poland are examples of this. In contrast, the first years of newly independent Slovakia under Vladimír Mečiar present a counterexample. In any case, just as in Germany after the war, the successful setting up of a democracy takes time: The Weimar Republic offers a premonitory example of just how complicated it is to combine systemic change with fast solutions to fundamental problems, and this together with a difficult legacy. The effects of the transformations accompanying the 1989–91 path from dictatorship to democracy are also quite clear, and not just in the area of the economy, where liberalization has led to profound social consequences. The introduction of democracy was awaited with great expectations by the people, expectations that often could not be fulfilled, or fulfilled fast enough. And the replacement of political elites was neither dependable nor frictionless. Changing collective mentalities takes decades at least. In these countries, a democratic political culture still needs time to develop.

## VI.

In the 1980s, opposing tendencies regarding international cooperation could be observed in the West and East. In the East, the forced collaboration under Soviet hegemony began to revert to re-nationalization and disintegration, a process that accelerated from 1990. In the West, however, the trend was toward internationalization and (West-)European integration, as had been initially established in the ECSC and the Rome Treaties of the 1950s.

When the Soviet Union dissolved in 1991, a number of East Central European states sought closer connections to the West. This was manifest by the accession to NATO by Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic in 1999, as well as later further enlargements, resulting in the current 28 members and 25 security partnerships. The NATO-Russia Council was created in 1997 as a permanent consultation forum, despite setbacks such as the Russia-Georgia War and the debate about the deployment of US missile defense in Poland. This security forum is indeed remarkable if compared to the Cold War and the confrontation between NATO and the Warsaw Pact. Today NATO is the only remaining military alliance left in Europe. Its main power, the United States, has become the only world power, although this has been weakened by the war in Iraq, the long-term US military engagement there and in Afghanistan, and since 2008–09 by the global financial and economic crisis.

The role of NATO has changed. It is no longer the purely defensive alliance it was when founded in 1949 and which it remained for more than forty years. Taking part, from 1994, in UN combat operations in the former Yugoslavia involved security duties that were not provoked by an attack on one of NATO's members. In this context, the involvement of the German military has also been based on fundamental changes: during the first Iraq War in January–February 1991, the mere thought of military participation by the recently reunified Germany met fierce internal opposition.

## VII.

The caesura of 1989–91 was not just a sea change in the area of security policy, but also in the areas of economy and financial policy, as well as for human rights and national self-determination.

The reunification of Germany did not only result in a fundamental change for its constellation of domestic and foreign policies. The reunification process expressed an almost revolutionary solution to the German Question” a debate that had led to military conflict through the centuries. The reunification in 1989–90 used only peaceful and diplomatic means; it did not take place in opposition to neighboring states, but rather sought their agreement (even if this was sometimes quite difficult). Thus, it occurred within a European context. It was one of the most outstanding achievements of Euro-Atlantic politics and, especially, of former Federal Chancellor Helmut Kohl. For a long time in European history, a united Germany did not traumatize its neighbors: reunification was not achieved only on the German stage, but on the European and world stage, with decisive support from the United States.

The remaining open questions of 1945 regarding international law and power structures were conclusively resolved. I will name only a few examples: the peace treaty which had been lacking between 1945 and 1990 was achieved in the Two Plus Four Agreement; the international recognition of the Oder-Neisse border was ratified in 1990; and the withdrawal of Soviet/Russian troops from Germany as well as its Eastern neighbors was regulated.

This process opened up a number of possibilities for the future, not only for the Germans, but also for the former states of the Warsaw Pact. The principles of popular sovereignty, national internal and external independence, as well as human and civil rights were now not merely acknowledged abstractly, but implemented in practice. The end of the division of Germany, of Europe, and the world hastened the European Monetary Union, which had been planned from the end of the 1980s. The Union was now backed by the debates concerning German reunification and European integration, and was particularly supported by Helmut Kohl and François Mitterrand. There is no question that the ratified measures were es-

sential steps toward European integration, including the step-by-step introduction of the Euro from 1998, the accession of Finland, Austria and Sweden to the union, as well as the 1985 Schengen Treaty, the 1997 Amsterdam Treaty, and finally the above-mentioned Eastern Enlargement of the European Union in 2004.

In this process, Austria has served as a link to Central and South-Eastern Europe due to its Habsburg tradition, elements of which, while part of the distant past, have proven recoverable. But there are questions that remain open. For example, notwithstanding the Lisbon Treaty, which provided a constitutional basis for the European Union, can its 27 member states (2012) function together, despite their wide political, economic and cultural differences? And how well will the monetary union function if national budget policies in the Euro zone do not follow the required guidelines?

### **Conclusion**

The epochal changes of 1989–91 clearly led toward a globalization of the financial markets and the world economy. The consequences of this cannot yet be fathomed. In any case, the jolt of the recent global financial crisis has once again demonstrated the degree to which national economic policy is losing its influence. Also unclear is how these changes have affected the self-perception of democratic societies, since they no longer define themselves in opposition to dictatorships. Rather, they will have to reflect more on their own fundamental values.

The European coordination of its various governments' foreign policies is still wanting, a need that in recent years has even increased. Once again, this shows that even the traditional core states of the European Union, between one another, no longer have roles that are defined as clearly as they were during the Cold War. This also involves new efforts needed for defining the European role of Germany. Undoubtedly, this transformation process also holds risks to political stability. Here, the fatal experiences of the interwar period can serve as a warning: at that time, the unsuccessful transformations of the political systems in most of the individual states in Europe led to the destruction of many recently founded democracies.

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