

'Democracy takes a step forward' from La Libre Belgique (3 October 1990)

Caption: On 3 October 1990, commenting on the official reunification of Germany, the daily newspaper La Libre Belgique emphasises the historic importance of the event and speculates on the political future of the reunified, democratic Germany.

Source: La Libre Belgique. 03.10.1990, n° 276; 108e année. Bruxelles: Edition de la Libre Belgique S.A. "Une avancée de la démocratie", auteur:Franck, Jacques , p. 1; 2.

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Democracy takes a step forward

By Jacques Franck

The fireworks that lit up the sky over the two Germanies on the stroke of midnight were a signal to the world that the two had become one. That the Second World War and the ensuing Cold War were finally at an end. That Germany was triumphantly united through the entry into force of the Unification Treaty that the Bundestag in Bonn and the People's Chamber in East Berlin had approved with majorities far greater than the required two thirds. A day of joy, then, and an unforgettable day in history.

And yet ... these fireworks are a long way from the tiny candles lit on the Berlin Wall on the night of 9 November 1989, which brought tears of happiness to the eyes of the Germans embracing under the Brandenburg Gate. Everything has happened so quickly since, and German reunification has caught the world short. Nothing has really been settled. Nobody can be sure of anything. Except that the street names will change, the statues of Marx and Lenin will be dismantled and the Stalinist glass and concrete framework of the Palace of the Republic on Marx-Engels-Platz will probably be demolished: asbestos has been found in the structure ...

So, from today, the German Democratic Republic (GDR) is no more. And yet ... it will continue to exist for some time as a result of the instructions and exceptions included in the Unification Treaty, which, to use the striking image of a journalist on the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, will act like a canal lock to level the countless differences in the two Germanies' legislation, from labour protection to abortion and telecommunications. Differences so immeasurable that they set the rapid pace for German reunification.

If the differences had been smaller, the negotiations to overcome them would have been slower and more complex. Yet the industrial jewel in Eastern Europe's crown and the Soviet Union's privileged partner turned out to be such a specimen of industrial archaeology (of the 1940s!) that there was nothing that the West Germans could do other than assume wholesale responsibility for East Germany and pay the price.

Indeed, nobody was eager for such speedy and complete reunification of Germany. Chancellor Kohl is not Bismarck. At the most, he managed very skilfully to surf the wave that threw the East Germans, mainly Prussians and Saxons, into the arms of the dumbfounded Rhinelanders and Bavarians. Who were perhaps not quite ready for all that. And had certainly not had time to work out what it was all going to cost.

The cost is enormous: some speak of 25 000 million Belgian francs over the next five years. So the euphoria is starting to fade, and, indeed, a poll just published by *Der Spiegel* shows that 29 % of West Germans are opposed to reunification. But, since East Germans voted for it en masse in March, surely their cousins in the West have a moral obligation to take care of them? Yes, of course they do, and yet ...

As the West Germans have taken the measure of the gap that separated them from the East Germans for four decades, they have become aware that the backwardness is intellectual as well as material. The East Germans will need to be taught everything, from computing to opening a bank account, or simply doing a decent day's work. In the East, meanwhile, the newly rediscovered freedom and the abundance of consumer goods are not enough to stop a wave of nostalgia washing over older people and those in mid-career, afraid they may be unable to adjust to a new way of life, who were protected from the rat-race and propped up by a social security system beyond compare. So nobody is really very happy in either of the Germanies. And yet ...

And yet, 3 October 1990 is a great day. The new Germany forming before our eyes has been reunited through entirely peaceful methods. She has renounced all territorial claims and border disputes. She remains firmly anchored within the European Community and NATO. She has demonstrated that, following in the footsteps of her mere twelve years of democracy under the Weimar Republic, she has forgotten neither Auschwitz nor the gulags.

So these events represent a step forward for freedom, peace and democracy in Europe. There are problems

remaining to be solved and quite a number of questions yet to be answered. But German reunification is the key to the reunification of Europe. The wall of shame no longer slashes across the Germany of Bach, Goethe and the Jewish writer Heinrich Heine. Has the great German people, heir to the language of Mozart, Schubert and Kafka, finally found peace? Who among us did not dream tonight, as the Germans gathered under the eponymous lime trees of Unter den Linden, that, in a hundred years, historians would be able to write: 'Peace in Germany began on 3 October 1990.'

Jacques Franck