

Address given by Lothar de Maizière on the eve of German unity (Berlin, 2 October 1990)

Caption: On 2 October 1990, at the ceremony on the eve of German unity, Lothar de Maizière, Prime Minister of the German Democratic Republic (GDR), gives an address in which he describes the historic impact of the creation of a reunified German state.

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Speech by the then Prime Minister of the German Democratic Republic, Lothar de Maiziere, at the ceremony on the eve of German unity, Berlin, 2 October

We are one nation. We are becoming one state. In a few moments the German Democratic Republic will accede to the Federal Republic of Germany. We Germans are thus achieving unity in freedom.

It is a moment of great joy. It is the end of many an illusion. It is a farewell without tears.

62 million citizens of the Federal Republic of Germany and 16 million citizens of the German Democratic Republic are from now on citizens of a united Germany. There is now only one German state.

What to most people was still only a dream is becoming reality, the fact that we can again live together naturally as one nation in keeping with our centuries-long spiritual and cultural traditions and continuing our family and emotional ties.

The people in a united Germany can now shape their future together again. After 40 years of division we are now a free community in a freely integrating Europe.

Through two devastating wars and through the murder of six million Jews and the many other nazi crimes, Germans have in this century caused untold suffering. We regard this burdensome chapter of our history as a permanent warning to seek reconciliation and to promote international understanding.

We consider it a major responsibility to foster the integration of the whole of Europe. We want to be a link between the people in the Eastern and the Western part of our continent, with their different circumstances, needs and expectations.

The 2 October 1990 marks the end of a chapter in our history. It began on 30 January 1933 and led via much suffering to the terrible catastrophe of war which left Europe in ruins.

One of the consequences was 7 October 1949, when a German part-state, the German Democratic Republic, was established on the territory of what used to be the Soviet-occupied zone of Germany.

That state called itself democratic but was not. It was built on the use of force against a dissident population. This was one of the foundations of its existence and at the same time the cause of its failure.

On 17 June 1953 that state suppressed an uprising against its omnipresent, totalitarian system by force of arms. And by erecting the wall in Berlin on 13 August 1961 and ordering the guards to shoot anyone trying to get out it turned the screw of oppression tighter still.

That wall will go down in history as one of the most inhumane monuments. It deprived the people of their right to move about freely and for almost 30 years separated families, friends and countrymen. 192 people lost their lives seeking freedom. We shall never forget them.

The wall, the barbed-wire and the so-called state security were shocking manifestations of the abuse of power and the use of force. They allowed socialism, as Vaclav Havel put it, to become a stick. They destroyed the hopes of those who believed socialism could be the path into a better world.

The wall and barbed-wire were only the visible signs of bondage. There were also quite different kinds of oppression. Ideological constraint generated a climate of mental bondage which prevented individual self-fulfilment. Imagination and creativity were superseded by uncertainty, a distorted perception, and conformity.

The abuse of power went hand in hand with the regime's inability to tolerate, let alone accept, criticism. Dissidents were isolated, arrested or deprived of their citizenship. Since the last war 4.6 million Germans have voluntarily or involuntarily left their homes in Mecklenburg- Western Pomerania, Brandenburg,

Saxony, Saxony-Anhalt and Thuringia for the West. Today still we are suffering heavily from that loss. I hope that many of those who left will return home.

But coercion and tyranny have not had the last word. Last autumn demonstrators chanted "We are the people", thus unmistakably expressing their longing for democracy. With great courage they demanded in what was at first an unequal contest liberty, democracy and decent conditions.

The means they used were not violence, radicalism or destruction but peaceful demonstrations, prayers for peace, and burning candles. It was a victory of circumspection over a party and regime which for years had intimidated and tyrannized the people then weakly collapsed.

This was only possible because the Soviet Union, too, under Mikhail Gorbachev no longer had the will to sustain by force of arms a system not prepared to reform itself.

At its inception 40 years ago the German Democratic Republic did have some idealistic features. But they could not prevail in spite of the fact that many men and women gave of their best, believing in the ideals enforced upon them. I recall in this connection the many emigres who returned thinking they were coming back to a better homeland. When the end came it revealed a system which

- had shown utter contempt for the principle of equality,
- unscrupulously ruined our natural environment,
- deliberately concealed the disastrous state of the economy,
- had sold prisoners, trained terrorists, and deceived especially younger people with false enemy-images.

The more the extent of this cynical abuse of power becomes known the greater the shock. We have all the more reason, therefore, to be grateful for the fact that the revolution succeeded.

We are grateful above all to those who unerringly pursued their course despite being exposed to the greatest danger: The "Monday" demonstrators in Leipzig and the many in other cities who time and again took to the streets; the Churches and their various groups whose initiatives began in 1982 with their "swords to ploughshares" movement and culminated in prayers for peace. We also thank those who associated with or supported them despite being of different creed. I also mention those who were forced out of the country but never stopped calling a spade a spade and kept on demanding more freedom for the people in the German Democratic Republic.

We appreciate the part played by our neighbours in this development. Through its courageous decision to permit East German citizens to pass unhindered through its territory to the West, Hungary broke the first symbolic stone out of the wall.

East Germany's accession today terminates the dramatic phase of reorientation that began in the autumn of 1989.

We stand on the threshold of a new age. We can embark on the road into the future under promising conditions, the conditions of freedom, democracy, rule of law and social justice. These assets are of greater value than the material advantages which, understandably, occupy people's thoughts after such a long period of privation.

Our common future will depend on the amount of understanding we show for one another. Those on the one side must not adopt a superior attitude, and those on the other must not merely see themselves as learners with the added burden of their history.

We will only achieve true unity if we are willing to correct the many prejudices stemming from ignorance.

This mutual understanding also requires us to respect each other's ideals - even if we do not share them. The end of an ideology which for many was a bitter disappointment should not destroy our belief in all ideals.

Some of the shadows of the past are particularly dark and they will long be with us. To light up the darkness all those concerned must show a maximum degree of responsibility and self-discipline. We will make an honest attempt to come to terms with all aspects of that chapter of our history, but at the end, after all questions of guilt and innocence have been settled, there must be reconciliation and social harmony. The past must not hamper our progress into the future. It must not divide our future anew.

Not everyone will find this transition today easy. I am referring above all to those who remained, despite having hardly any prospects, because they felt they had a duty here. They did not want to take the easy road; they deliberately chose the harder one.

To them, to all of us, the history of the past 40 years, notwithstanding all the contradictions and burdens, is part of our personal biography, a part of our own being. The daily frictions with the system have left deep impressions on those who stayed behind. Resisting the regime as far as possible and the pressure to conform required a constant effort.

Bearing the system on the one hand and the modest degree of happiness which did exist on the other, created a sense of identity and togetherness which some will find hard to leave behind. Perhaps only those who have had this conflicting experience can really understand.

I well realize that many citizens are now faced with problems. The new currency, the economic reorganization and the introduction of a new political system naturally cause difficulties. Nevertheless, we must make the best of this opportunity in spite of what others say. We must see our problems in relation to our past - and to the incomparably greater difficulties confronting our Eastern neighbours.

The extinction of the German Democratic Republic also marks a great positive transformation that history offers only rarely. We really do have every cause for joy and gratitude. We have the opportunity to achieve unity in peace and freedom in agreement with our partners and neighbours. We can make a new beginning on the basis of the freedom we have won through our own efforts, the unity we have sought, the justice we have been deprived of for too long, and the human dignity which has been restored to us.

We are becoming part of a democratic system which, in spite of some deficiencies which we should not overlook, has proved its value. The framework for that system is provided by the Basic Law, which is much admired. From now on it will apply also in the five new federal states and in undivided Berlin. Its fundamental precept is freedom based on responsibility.

Freedom is the best promoter of individual ability. It is one of the greatest tests of the human character. Making the best of that freedom both for ourselves and for the community as a whole is a fascinating task for us all.

Not what we were yesterday but what we want to be together tomorrow makes us one state. From tomorrow there will be a united Germany. We have waited a long time. We look forward to shaping it together.