

The international issue of German reunification

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Reunification was not merely an intra-German affair. The status of Germany, and in particular that of Berlin, could be amended only with the agreement of the Four Powers who had forced Germany's unconditional surrender in 1945. These countries might well be anxious about the formation at the centre of Europe of a State of 80 million inhabitants whose political, economic and financial importance was likely to upset the balance of power and threaten the stability that the division of Germany had helped to establish.

Consequently, Chancellor Helmut Kohl and his Foreign Minister, Hans-Dietrich Genscher, worked hard to reassure them. In his programme for reunification of 28 November 1989, the Chancellor confirmed that German unity would take place in the context of the European Community. He then promised that a united Germany would remain part of NATO and that reunification would be undertaken in close consultation with the Allies. The Strasbourg European Council (8–9 December) gave this plan formal acknowledgement: it approved the unification of Germany on condition that the country was run in a democratic fashion, 'in full respect of the relevant agreements and treaties and of all the principles defined by the Helsinki Final Act, in a context of dialogue and East-West cooperation ... [and] in the perspective of European integration.'

However, despite these statements of principle, divergent attitudes set France and the United Kingdom, which were not in any great hurry to see reunification take place, against the United States, which was pushing for it to happen, and the Soviet Union, which was resigned to it happening in return for certain guarantees.

In the United Kingdom, there was persistent mistrust towards Germany, and the Conservative Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, expressed her concerns. She declared that until the GDR and its neighbouring countries became democratic, she would rather that Germany remained divided. Integration into a European federation did not seem to her to be a viable solution since a reunified Germany would dominate its partner countries. She would have preferred the creation of a counter-balancing union comprising the United Kingdom, France and the United States, but she was unsuccessful; the Americans gave priority to their relations with Germany, and the French were attached to the Franco–German axis.

Hesitations also arose in France. A unified Germany might turn towards the USSR, despite the difference in political regimes, as had been the case with the German–Soviet treaties of 1922 (Rapallo) and 1939 (Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact). President Mitterrand would initially have preferred Germany to remain divided. He told Mikhail Gorbachev this in Kiev on 6 December. On 22 November, he announced a visit to the GDR, which took place on 20–22 December when reunification was a virtual certainty. Mitterrand had to accept it, but he subordinated German unity to European unification and to the strengthening of the Community institutions. Helmut Kohl responded to François Mitterrand's uncertainty by confirming that German unity and European unity were two sides of the same coin. Mitterrand and Kohl agreed that a Franco–German alliance would boost the idea of political union in Europe.

It was the United States that provided the most active support to the West German Government, as the FRG represented its strongest partner in continental Europe. But the United States was aware that reunification ought not to weaken the cohesion of the Atlantic Alliance or jeopardise Gorbachev's policy of openness towards the West. It therefore

remained committed to Europe, a stance that reassured the United Kingdom and France.

In the Soviet Union, Gorbachev, who would have preferred Germany to remain divided with a reformed GDR, stated in January 1990 that reunification was inevitable and that he would accept this according to the old Soviet ideal of a unified and neutral Germany. Kohl, who met Gorbachev on 10 February, declared that neutralisation was unacceptable. This resulted in an impasse. Finally, the Soviet Union's imperative need for Western economic and financial aid forced Gorbachev to relent. The President of the United States, George Bush, who had met Gorbachev on 3 December 1989 in Malta, promised him massive aid packages if he accepted the integration of the former GDR into NATO. For his part, Kohl promised to contribute to the financial cost of having Soviet troops stationed in the GDR. Lastly, the G7 group of leading industrialised countries, meeting on 7 July, came out in favour of providing economic aid to the USSR.