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East Germans promised free elections • 100,000 cross Berlin's open borders

Kohl: 'We are one nation'



Face to face . . . East and West meet on the Berlin Wall at the Brandenburg Gate as the citizens of the divided city celebrate East Germany's opening of the border

Germans seize the moment of national opportunity

Commentary
Martin Woollacott

THIS has been Germany's year. From the crisis over Nato modernisation in March to the casting down of the Wall in November stretch an astonishing nine months in which Germans on both sides have reached out with increasing boldness to take their destiny into their own hands.

The rest of Europe has watched in fascination and sometimes in fear. The international landscape with which we began 1989 — the old, familiar structures of the two alliances, the Anglo-American special relationship, the European Community's halting progress toward greater unity, and the newer but also beginning to be familiar element of reform in the Soviet Union — is being transformed, and it is Germany which is leading that transformation. Insofar as the old remains, it is like an empty chrysalis, preserving the shape but not the substance of what existed before.

How distant now seem the quarrels of the spring over the introduction of new short-range missiles. West Europeans and Americans were arguing angrily about whether the Soviet Union was conspiratorially seeking to gain military advantage by negotiating away the West's remaining tactical nuclear weapons and then stalling on conventional reductions.

Strange to recall, we were still thinking in terms of East bloc tank armies and fighter squadrons, still counting divisions on the map of central Europe, and still, some of us, acting as if the USSR remained a dangerous antagonist.

The revolt of the Federal Republic government against this antique thinking can be seen as the starting point for the great burst of German national assertion which culminated yesterday in the streets of Berlin.

Although Chancellor Kohl later agreed to an apparent compromise it was clear even then — how much more so now — that West Germany had killed the programme, and it had done so because it sensed far better than any of its Nato partners how completely President Gorbachev had changed the situation in Europe.

The West Germans had cast an unprecedented veto against new nuclear weapons.

They had done so after a period of co-operation and consultation with East Germany which looks in retrospect like a laying of the groundwork for what was to come in both Germanys.

The Federal Republic became the strongest advocate of arms control within Nato and the German Democratic Republic played the same role in the Warsaw Pact. Here was the partial and still nuanced defiance of their respective Alliance masters that indicated both a

German refusal of the role of victims in the superpower struggle and a sense in both German states that the room for manoeuvre was growing.

If the March crisis over missile modernisation now seems something from another era, so too do the fears of the summer.

Germans on both sides realised that the Soviet Union had made not one but two fundamental international decisions. The first, of course, was to seek peace with the West. The second was that force could not and should not be used to maintain Communist authority in Eastern Europe.

For East Germans, watching Poland and Hungary, the message was there: things were moving toward the point where you could leave the country without real risk, and you could criticise the party without real risk.

Out of that realisation came the explosive mixture of a massive emigration from East Germany and an overwhelming popular challenge to the party inside it. The reaction of Americans and other Europeans to the summer exodus was, however, still embedded in the old thinking. The Soviet Union would only permit a united Germany if that state was to be neutral, the argument went, and that way lay the old nightmare of a Germany swinging between East and West. But the whole idea of neutralisation presupposes the continued existence of a world polarised between East and West, a world which is literally disappearing before our eyes.

It must now be clear that whatever form of unification or quasi-unification is eventually arrived at will not involve the neutralisation of West Germany in any meaningful sense.

Instead what we have before us is a German triumph that could not have happened without Gorbachev and Walesa, a triumph that was not planned and which is in many ways an accident, but which nevertheless has come about because both West and East Germans have seized the moment of national opportunity. In doing so they have pointed the way to a European future in which Germany will be the single biggest power, economically, politically, and perhaps even militarily, so far as that still matters.

For the rest of Europe this assertion of German nationhood has its unavoidably bitter dimension. Britain has spent the last 100 years fighting against the facts of German power: indeed our modern national identity has to a great extent been forged in the fires of the great conflict with Germany while our sense of our moral worth rests in part on our role in the defeat of Nazism.

Even in the post-war period Britain's understanding of itself has continued to be fashioned by our taking a leading part in the containment of Germany that was the unspoken second function of the Nato Alliance.

For the French, too, the trauma must be a serious one. Their recent history is also

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Anna Tomford and Michael Farr in Berlin

THE West German Chancellor, Dr Helmut Kohl, declared in Berlin yesterday: "Long live a free German fatherland, a free united Europe."

"We are and will remain one nation. Step by small step we will find our way to a common solution," he told a crowd of some 20,000 Berliners outside the city's Schöneberg Rathaus, the seat of West Berlin's government.

Dr Kohl's forthright emphasis on unity came as East Germany's bewildered and beleaguered leaders announced new reforms and a fresh round of sackings from the ruling politburo yesterday, coupled with a public promise of free elections.

During a day marked by extraordinary and emotional scenes of jubilation, more than 100,000 people poured through the increasingly open border to the West. Most of them returned after a brief and long-awaited glimpse at the West.

In East Berlin, as the Communist Party's central committee continued in crisis session, the East German President, Mr Egon Krenz, declared: "We

have a great task ahead of us . . . to carry through a revolution on German soil that will bring a socialism which is economically effective, politically democratic, and morally clean."

He and Dr Kohl are expected to meet next week following the swearing in of a new East German Government on Monday.

Last night, Mr Krenz told a Communist Party rally that the new travel regulations, allowing East Germans to go to the West whenever they wish, should be taken as proof that the government was "serious about the policy of renewal".

His interior minister, Mr Friedrich Dickel, said the restriction-free travel policy announced on Thursday was "permanent and will be the foundation of a new travel law".

Last night, as amazed East Berliners looked on, East German soldiers began knocking down sections of the Wall that has divided their city for 28 years. There were unconfirmed reports from residents in Bernauerstrasse that bulldozers had started demolishing it as well. East German authorities began opening five new crossing points through the Wall.

Elsewhere along the frontier, another 40,000 East Germans crossed into West Germany, but

only 2,500 decided to stay in the West, according to figures released in Bonn.

Although the flight westwards is expected to rise significantly over the weekend, the relatively small number of East Germans who have so far actually left their country permanently suggests that the leadership's decision on free travel was a shrewd move.

After a three-day crisis meeting, the Communist Party Central Committee revealed an "action programme for renewal" which holds out the prospect of free elections, a democratic coalition government and parliamentary investigations into malpractices and abuses of power.

Four members and candidate members were sacked from the ruling politburo, elected only on Wednesday. Two had been voted out of their top party positions by their district branches and the other two stepped down after pressure from the Central Committee.

A party control commission will begin investigation into "misconduct" by two former politburo members, Mr Günter Mittag and Mr Joachim Hermann, responsible for the economy and the media in the politburo.

East Germany's prosecutor

general has suggested that a parliamentary committee should investigate charges of corruption and power abuse by state and party officials.

Mr Günter Wendland said top party members had enjoyed unjustified privileges, enriched themselves, taken advantage of their positions and "squandered national wealth".

In view of the great significance and the extent of these malpractices the investigations should be tackled by parliament, he said.

The Volkskammer will meet in emergency session on Monday at which the Prime Minister-designate, Mr Hans Modrow, and the new East German Government will be confirmed.

It is now clear that it was the reform-minded Mr Modrow and his supporters in the Central Committee who urged the leadership to press ahead swiftly with fundamental change, including the surprise decision to allow free travel.

Mr Modrow told the Central Committee that the future government not only needed new faces.

It had to be "a real government which at a later point could even become a coalition". The relationship between the party and the government had

to be completely overhauled, Mr Modrow urged.

"We shall have to conduct parliamentary debates in a style the Communist Party has not yet seen in its entire history," Mr Modrow said. Deputies had to become "genuine representatives" of the people.

The party newspaper, Neues Deutschland, in an outspoken editorial yesterday, conceded that Communist Party members were among those who had begun to question the party's leading role. "Significant errors" had been committed by the party "to the detriment of our country".

In West Berlin the huge crowd at the Rathaus, some of whom had crossed from the East to listen to the speeches, reserved their greatest enthusiasm for the former Social Democrat leader, Chancellor and Mayor of West Berlin, Mr Willy Brandt, who told them, to wild cheers: "Berlin will live and the Berlin Wall will come down . . ."

Mr Brandt, who was Mayor of West Berlin 28 years ago when East Berlin put up the Wall and who stood next to Mr Kennedy during his famous speech, said the barbed wire and wall were "against the flow of history", but added that it should remain as an "an historical monument".

He added that he was sure Presidents Bush and Gorbachev would approve of what was happening in Germany at their Mediterranean summit next month, and believed that France and Britain, who had given such support during the long and difficult years as well as "our East European neighbours" would understand.

The present Mayor of West Berlin, Mr Walter Momper, told the crowd: "We are now the happiest people in the world, but in this hour of happiness we should remember the many dead and injured and the pain caused by this wall."

"In East Germany a fascinating chapter of history is being written by the people. We congratulate you on your peaceful and democratic revolution."

But Mr Momper, faced with accommodating those coming from the East, said that while everyone was welcome, the question should also be asked whether people were not needed "to create a better society in East Germany".

Citizens of united city overcome their disbelief



Michael Farr in Berlin

YESTERDAY Berlin ceased to be a divided city. Tens of thousands of East Berliners streamed to the West, unhindered for the first time since the Wall was put up 28 years ago.

Most crossed just for the experience of a freedom they had been denied so long. They simply looked at shop windows, stopped at cafes on the fashionable Kudamm Street or visited friends.

As they came off the S-Bahn trains, drove their battered Trabants across the border crossing, or just walked through, they pinched themselves in disbelief.

Not one of the many East Berliners I spoke to at several crossing points said they meant to stay in the West. They came with their spouses, friends and children for a historic stroll.

Many more are expected to cross today, which for most is not a working day.

A group of East German workers still in their blue overalls in West Berlin's equivalent of Oxford Street, the Wilmersdorferstrasse, bought doughnuts and Western newspapers "to prove we've been here".

Getting off a packed S-Bahn carriage at the Zoo station, a woman pointed out to her husband the Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church: "Look! I never thought we

could see it like this."

An East Berlin policeman was on the platform to offer directions and give advice.

At the Invalidenstrasse crossing, West Berliners greeted those from the East with flowers and cheers.

Among the vehicles at the Bornholmerstrasse crossing, I saw two East German taxis with passengers.

One East Berliner was driven from the crossing to Charlottenburg, three miles away in the British sector, at the concessionary rate of 1 East Mark to 1 Deutsche Mark, compared with the market rate of 10:1, highlighting the fact that the only constraint on East Germans is now financial.

East Berliners have been

offered free tickets for a football match today in West Berlin as well as to a number of concerts and the opera.

Flying over the Bornholmerstrasse yesterday, I saw a scrum of East Berliners massing to cross its bridge. Royal Military Police, responsible for the Wall along the British sector, maintained their patrols and Army Air Corps helicopters hovered overhead, monitoring the remarkable proceedings.

Huge crowds built up on the Western side of the Wall as West Berliners witnessed the historic developments, some even crossing over into the East for a walk.

In front of the Brandenburg Gate and elsewhere,

they perched precariously on top of the Wall, clapping and calling for it to go.

It was unclear last night how many East Berliners planned to stay in the West, where facilities are increasingly being overstretched. But as the West German cities of Bremen and Hanover said they could take no more refugees, Berlin was still offering a warm welcome.

"After all we are not just one people, we are also one city," said one West Berliner, who described the last 24 hours as "simply unbelievable".

Another added: "Now what the politicians have always called for has happened, we must rise to the occasion."

The Berlin Wall crumbles

Soviets welcome the collapse

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