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**Article**

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# Revolution and Nation - 1989/90 in Historical Perspective<sup>1</sup>

*Jürgen Kocka*

## 1 Europe's Unity

The French Revolution of 1789 deepened the division of Europe. It led into two decades of European wars. For more than a century, the development of Central and Eastern Europe differed from the West European pattern, since most countries east of the River Rhine neither accepted nor imitated the socio-political model of the French Revolution, but reacted with a mixture of adjustment and rejection. A gradual estrangement between Western Europe and Central Europe began, and this was one root of the "German divergence from the West" which reached its climax in the 1930s and 1940s.

The Russian Revolution of 1917 laid the ground for another, even deeper division of Europe. It triggered a long conflict between oppositional ideologies and systems, a conflict which fundamentalized the struggle between the two great powers after 1945 and which reached its climax in the Cold War. This East/West conflict divided Germany, polarized Europe and contributed to the levelling-off of the old line of tension which had separated Germany from the West.

By contrast, the Central and East-European revolutions of 1989 have contributed to uniting the continent. They have started or accelerated the transition towards a general European pattern where it had been forestalled until then. This general European pattern consists of a market-based but government influenced economy; of a pluralist, but unequal society; and of a liberal-democratic government organized around parties and state-interest-group mediation.

Certainly, in individual countries, transition towards this pattern is occurring with different speed in different forms, with different chances of success. On the way it may turn out that such a transition

presupposes a degree of socio-economic maturity and certain cultural traditions which do not yet exist everywhere. Probably, differences between the West and the East of the continent, between the European core and the European periphery will become more visible again in the years to come. Old divides along national and cultural lines will reemerge. These will be sources of new problems, tensions and conflicts. There will be no "end of history" and no end of wars, even within Europe.

Nevertheless, with respect to the basic economic order, with respect to constitutional principles, and with respect to official political philosophy, Europe today is less fragmented, less divided than it has been at any point in time within the last two centuries. Actually, this new European consensus is a Western consensus, shared by countries like the United States of America and Australia, while Russia and the other successor states of the Soviet Union approach it only halfheartedly and with very uncertain chances of success.

## **2 Particularities of the Revolution of 1989**

Why should the changes of 1989/90 have had such a unifying effect on most of Europe? Certainly, the developments differed from country to country, but there were some similarities. There are three characteristics of the 1989 revolutions which can be put into historical perspective, and which may explain their unifying effect.

### *1. On Ideas and Aims*

In contrast to 1789 and 1917, the revolutions of 1989 were not inspired by new, utopian ideas, nor did they give birth to new visions of alternative systems or alternative ways of life. Certainly, theories of a "third way" between Eastern state socialism and Western state-influenced capitalism were looked for, but could not be found. Certainly, intellectuals and some politicians advocated "socialism with a human face" again, but wherever such visions became more concrete they turned out to be mere variations of the social-democratic and ecological program which can be regarded to be part of the Western system. Certainly, there has been some talk about "*Mittleuropa*," as distinguished from the East and the West, and this did have some influence in preparing the revolution, at least in Budapest and Prague. But by and large, these ideas remained vague and marginal. Certainly, the breakdown of the old régimes led to a new stress on direct-democratic, consensus-orientated, participatory forms of politics. One remembers

the "round tables," the mass demonstrations, citizens' councils, "Bürgerforen" and other expressions of grass root democracy, most clearly perhaps in East-Germany. There were utopian moments in Leipzig and Berlin in October 1989, small minorities saw themselves to a more perfect form of democracy, reaching beyond the parliamentary party democracy of the West. But these manifestations of direct democracy were a reaction to a short-lived vacuum of power in the early phase of transition, much weaker than comparable manifestations in history, especially the council movements, in 1917 or 1918/19. They were soon absorbed by representative, forms of democratic politics, without much resistance and everywhere.

As a whole, the revolutions of 1989 were inspired and guided by democratic and liberal ideas which have become central in Western political thought since the 18th century: the norms of a civil society, human and civil rights, the principles of constitutional, democratic government; pluralism and the legitimacy of dissent; a separation of economic and political power; individual freedom and national autonomy, and in this context: the market. Principles of this kind - together with a desire for improved material standards of life- have inspired the opposition to the Marxist-Leninist dictatorship, the debates of the intellectuals in Warsaw, Budapest and Prague, but also -partly- the rhetoric of revolution in Leipzig and Berlin. These were principles which, to some extent, have become reality in the West, although not without exceptions and always at risk. This is why the revolutions of 1989 basically had the aim and the function of catching up with the West, or rather: with some essential elements of Western society which contains many other, less attractive elements as well.

## II. *On Causation*

The momentum of change was partly generated within the societies between the river Elbe and the Soviet border. Potentials of protest had grown within them. This was most obvious in Poland and Hungary, and least in the GDR. Economic stagnation and even decline in the 80s played a major role. These countries lived beyond their means, consumed and eroded their substance, could not keep up in the race with the West. Generational change too played a role. The political consciousness of the young was less stamped by the memory of Fascism and World War II, a memory which had been so important for legitimizing the socialist-communist system to the elder generation. The utopian promise of a better future is bound to lose much of its motivating force if it is repeated over years, without fulfillment in reality, particularly if times are peaceful and the class-enemy outside cannot

easily be blamed for the continuous contradiction between promise and reality. The policies of détente, climaxing in the 1975 Helsinki agreement and its consequences, finally paid. In this climate of relative relaxation, tendencies aiming at civil liberties were not altogether absent in East European societies which - although restricted, regulated and retarded in many ways - also participated in the process of modernization.

In other words, there were important intrinsic sources of change in those relatively inflexible dictatorial structures incapable of basic reform. But the decisive factor for revolutionary changes providing us with an explanation why they occurred at the end of the 80s and not ten years earlier or later, was the sudden weakening of the Soviet Union.

This is not the place to analyze in detail what generated the change in the Soviet Union, in the mid 1980s. Afghanistan certainly played a role, and so did Reagan's policy mix of aggressive armament and diplomatic flexibility, which represented a difficult challenge to the Soviet Union, while it tended to overburden the US economy as well. Many other factors contributed, such as the generational change, the decreasing power of historic memory, an increasing malfunctioning of the bureaucracy, an improved average education in some strata of the population, the personality of Gorbachev.

A decisive factor was the increasing incompatibility between a dictatorial, centrally controlled, non-pluralistic system and economic imperatives, in the period of the third industrial revolution with its stress on micro-processes, information systems, self-generated change and unpredictable innovation. From economic inferiority in the continuing cut-throat competition with the West followed over-stretching and, once this was internally recognized and faced, partial retreat, attempts at basic reforms from above and other policy changes. At any rate, in the second half of the 1980s Soviet military force ceased to be available as an external surrogate for the weakness of internal legitimacy of the East European systems. This was in contrast to the conflicts of 1953 (GDR), 1956 (Hungary), 1968 (Czechoslovakia) and even still 1980/81 (Poland). In other words: many different factors led to the revolutions of 1989. But there was one central cause which they all shared: the amazingly peaceful and fast decline of Soviet power.

East European and East Central European nations have a long tradition of fighting for national independence against supra-national empires, against the Habsburg, the Czarist, the Ottoman Empires up to World War I, and against Hitler's Germany during World War II. This was the way in which they emerged and gained their identity. From this source East European nationalism has derived its vigor and its energy for more than a century. The revolutions of 1989 can be seen in this line of continuity. They were revolutions, but they were also acts of national

liberation from the last supra-national empire which had survived in Europe, the Soviet Union. It is hardly surprising that in this process national identities were reaffirmed and nationalist passions revitalized.

### III. *On Limits*

One cannot overlook the limits of these revolutions. With the exception of Romania, they were basically non-violent. This had something to do with the limited aims of most of the activists -there was no Robespierre and no Lenin among them-, but even more with the reactions of those in power. So far, nowhere have the old elites managed to organize a counter-revolution. Nowhere -except in Romania in 1989 (and partly in the Soviet Union 1991)- did the old régimes use military force to defend themselves. They gave in and broke down, very quickly. In addition, it should be noted that in most cases the deep changes occurred without breaking the law. Certainly, nearly everywhere mass pressure was decisive for initiating the change and pushing it through, but usually it was the old party organs and the old crippled assemblies -like the *Volkskammer* in East Berlin- which, under pressure, but in accordance with their own rules and the existing laws, replaced the old leadership and produced majority decisions in favor of deep-reaching constitutional changes, new electoral law and alternative property rights. All this distinguished the revolutions of 1989 from the pattern of 'classical' revolutions which used to be bloody, met the stiff resistance on the part of those in power, implied massive violations of the law, and usually went through a cycle of radicalization and counter-revolution. Compared with classic examples the revolutions of 1989 look reformist. Consequently, many participants and observers prefer to speak of "transition," "fundamental change," of "*Umbruch*" and "*Umwälzung*." Many participants and observers avoid the word "revolution" altogether.

Still, the term "revolution" can be justified, in three ways: Mass movements were central forces of change (least -by the way- in Hungary). Change was systemic and fundamental including replacement of political leadership, constitutional change, and the turnover of the principles of economic order and social organization. And these changes occurred in a relatively short period of time, particularly in the GDR, in Czechoslovakia and in Romania. It may be little more than a semantic question.

The reformist structure of these revolutions points to particularities of the historical situation in which they occurred. At least in the late 1980s, these dictatorships -except Romania- depended heavily on the backing of Soviet power, they lacked legitimacy, and their internal

support was eroding. But in the end they proved remarkably flexible. They were communist dictatorships, but of a post stalinist and post-totalitarian kind, again with the exception of Romania. They have been transformed into non-dictatorial systems without much blood-shed, war and catastrophe.

But this transition is not yet complete. Since they were peaceful, gradual, and reformist, these revolutions were not really radical. They did not change the elites below the top layer nor did they revolutionize the mentalities nor could they really restructure the economies. In all these respects they remained partial and incomplete. They initiated a process of change which has still a long way to go, in different countries in different forms and with unpredictable outcomes.

### **3 Revolution and Nation in East Germany**

The East German revolution had its particular structure and flavor, mainly due to the fact that the German Democratic Republic was confronted with the existence of another much stronger German state, the German Federal Republic, which never fully accepted the nation's division. In East Germany, there was no equivalent to the Czech Charta 77, to the Polish Solidarnos, or to Hungarian reform communism. Certainly, the East German revolution was not without its own dynamics. One can perhaps draw a thin line of continuity from the few protests against the invasion of Prague in 1968 to the late 1980s, e.g. protest at the side-lines of official parades and against the forged local elections of May 89. But on the whole the internal opposition had remained remarkably weak in the GDR, much weaker than in most other communist countries.

There are several reasons for that. By and large the SED, the East German communist party, was very effective in integrating the intellectuals. One could observe this still in the fall of 1989. Students, academics and intellectuals played a much less prominent role in the East German uprising than in Prague, Warsaw or Budapest. It must also be said that civil disobedience has never had a strong tradition in Germany, certainly not in East-Elbia. It is interesting to note that the East German revolution started in Saxony, not in Berlin. The weakness of the internal East German opposition was also linked to the existence of the German Federal Republic which was only too ready to accept actual and potential dissidents from East Germany thereby weakening the GDR's internal opposition.

On the other hand, the East German ruling elites proved to be particularly inflexible and stubborn because they had reason to fear that any reform would reduce the difference between the systems of the



GDR and the Federal Republic and would sooner or later lead to questioning the *raison d'être* of the East German state, which could claim historical justification as a separate, autonomous state only because of its socialist-communist character. This was a specific problem not shared by the other communist countries, whose *raison d'être* as separate states rested on their national identity.

This German particularity explains why the revolution in the GDR -within its first phase- did not use national arguments and symbols. In contrast to Warsaw, Budapest and Prague, mass mobilization in Leipzig, East Berlin and other East German cities proceeded from the beginning of the large street demonstrations in September until the fall of the Berlin wall in the night of November 9th, 1989 without national overtones. The aim of the speakers of the "New Forum" and most other proponents of the revolution was the democratization of the GDR but not its dissolution. Until the middle of November the quest for German unification did not play any role in the great mass demonstrations of East Germany, nor in the pronouncements of West German politicians. This topic was taboo.

However, the existence of two German states heavily influenced the East German revolution from its beginnings. It should be remembered that on the basis of its constitution and citizenship law, West Germany with no further requirements, formalities or waiting accepted every German as a citizen with all political and social rights from the moment he or she applied. This applied to all East Germans who managed to cross the fortified border. Without this "standing invitation" the famous 1989 mass migration from East to West Germany would not have taken place, a mass exodus which started during the summer, when first Hungary and later Poland and Czechoslovakia began to loosen their border controls and finally opened their borders, not without slight pressure from Bonn. It was this highly publicized mass exodus which demonstrated the unattractiveness and weakness of the East German régime beyond doubt. It was this mass exodus which triggered open demands for basic reform, and which spelt the end of the Honecker government and finally the wall.

This was the decisive mechanism of the East German revolution by which it differed from all others. The traditional weakness of the opposition within the GDR was compensated for by de-stabilizing effects resulting from the national context which, in spite of strong efforts by all GDR governments, continued to connect East and West Germany. Indirectly, therefore West Germany contributed to the East German revolution, not by a conscious unification policy of its leaders, but due to its very existence. This mechanism continued to be decisive in the second phase of the East German revolution.

The second phase of the East German revolution lasted from November 10, 1989 to the general election of March 18, 1990. A new communist but more flexible government came into office, led by Hans Modrow. It reached an uneasy, unstable arrangement with the emerging second center of power, the "Round Table" which met for the first time in early December. It represented the revolutionary groups, the other parties including emerging new ones, the churches and a few other groups. Cautiously, the constitution began to be modified in the direction of a more democratic, pluralistic system. The communist party tried to reform itself, adopted a new leadership and a new name, but lost the majority of its members. A date for free elections was set. The economic crisis sharpened and soon seemed to become dramatic. Migration to the West continued, and so did the mass demonstrations, though on a declining level. Criticism, rejection and hatred of the Ancien régime ran high, fuelled by revelations and public debates of its repressive mechanisms, injustices and crimes. The Stasi -powerful and pervasive state security service- became a major target. On January 15, its East-Berlin headquarters were stormed. The GDR power structure crumbled. Accusations and self-accusations, hatred and self-hatred mixed, many had been involved and shared responsibility. It is against this background of a cumulative decomposition of the GDR's structure that the revolution changed into a movement for national unification.

Between mid November and the middle of January the rhetoric, the symbols and the aims of the mass demonstration changed dramatically. The slogan "Wir sind das Volk" was gradually replaced by "Wir sind ein Volk." An increasing number of party platforms, resolutions, speeches and opinion surveys showed that this national turn had a broad and growing support in the East German population. The GDR was now abandoned by a majority of its citizens long before its official dissolution.

This national turn of the revolution was not engineered by the West German government, but it reacted to it in a positive way, cautiously first, very decidedly later. Once the border was opened, West German - East German contacts quickly increased, on all levels. There was unification from below, for a while, and there was unification from above. The West German parties extended their sphere of action into East Germany where they established branches or founded sister parties, West German politicians dominating the campaign during the East German elections. They promised a lot. Unification was the central issue in this campaign. The March elections resulted in an overwhelming majority for the parties who had advocated quick unification on West German terms. Those who had led the revolution in its first phase had organized themselves in the Alliance 90 (Bündnis 90) with the New

Forum as its central part. They won only 12 of a total of 500 parliamentary seats, a crushing defeat.

The single most important driving force behind this national turn was East German popular pressure. The majority of the East German population supported national unification. The rejection of the GDR was easily translated into high estimation for the Federal Republic which was perceived as superior in most respects. The vacuum resulting from GDR's collapse was partly filled by a new accentuation of one's national -German- identity. This mass support for unification on West German terms gained its power mainly via social and economic considerations. There was no doubt about the tremendous difference of living-standards and quality of life in general, between West and East Germans. Many East Germans thought and felt that this deep inequality between them and the West Germans could be reduced easier and faster under the common roof of one constitution. Within the framework of a nation state the chance to catch up with the West was considered much greater. In other words: the desire for social and economic improvement was at the center of the national quest raised by East Germans.

On the other hand, East German pressure in favor of unification would not have become so manifest and powerful, had it not been for the support by West Germany. After a short period of uncertainty the unification policy of Chancellor Kohl received support within the West German political class, across party lines, and within the population at large. There was not much national enthusiasm. For many West Germans, unification seemed the natural thing to do once it had become possible. Furthermore, the constitution obliged the government to pursue the aim of re-unification for decades. Rhetoric affirmation had been given to this aim. Common history, common historical experience and responsibility were evoked in order to argue in favor of national unity. It was not made clear, however, that unification would also bring hardship to many East Germans and demand sacrifices from West Germans. Counter-arguments -usually also on historical grounds- remained restricted to small minority groups. They were not influential, particularly since the government was surprisingly successful in securing international acceptance for its unification policy.

After March 18, 1990, a broad coalition government was formed in the GDR. Under its leadership, the newly elected parliament enacted many new laws and constitutional changes basically adopting West German rules. In a way, the revolution continued, but now in a representative democracy and increasingly under West German dominance. The time of the mass movements was over, the elements of grass root democracy disappeared. Details of the unification were hammered out in complicated negotiations, but largely on West German terms. At the end of July 1990 the West German economic system and

West German currency were extended to the GDR. On October 3, the GDR formally acceded to the Federal Republic, and ceased to exist.

#### 4 Conclusion

In 1989, there was a close relation between revolution and nation, everywhere in Eastern and East Central Europe. The battle for democratic change and the quest for national autonomy reinforced each other. It was possible again to pursue simultaneously liberal-democratic and national purposes. In this respect, one was reminded of 1848. In the meantime it has become clear that this re-born alliance between national and liberal-democratic policy perspectives cannot endure. The ugly face of nationalism is returning. Within Germany, the costs of unification have gradually become manifest. In 1992 right-wing radicalism has become a mass phenomenon. The economy is under pressure, unemployment increasing. The heritage of dictatorship is hard to swallow. 1989 will be remembered as a lucky moment in history between old and new evils. It is the national turn of the East German revolution which has caused sharp controversy and will continue to do so.

On the one hand there are those who think that the national turn has betrayed the revolution, turning it away from its original objectives. No question, the more West Germans took over, or rather, the more the East Germans asked for being taken over by the Federal Republic, the less likely it became that ideals of a democratic socialism could be pursued. Furthermore, the revolution sliding into unification, was inevitably deprived of its indigenous, East German character. It is true, that fundamental political, social, and economic changes have gone on, faster and more successfully than within the neighboring countries in the East. This radical restructuring of East Germany continues - with large human costs, but also with promising prospects. But from the perspective of many East Germans this is no longer their revolution, it has become a revolution from above and directed from outside. Again, they have become objects of historical developments whereas the revolution was meant to turn them into subjects of their own history. In Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary the "return to Europe" proceeds much slower than the Poles, the Czechs and Hungarians would like. But they do it themselves. While the East Germans move faster, they don't do it themselves, but are moved by their stronger brothers and sisters. And many of them dislike it. On this basis it can be deplored that the national turn brought the East German revolution to a virtual and untimely end.

On the other hand there are those who stress that the national turn of the East German revolution came from inside the GDR. They insist that elements of radical democracy in the East German revolution were extremely weak and vague, and never had a real chance of being practiced. They insist that in 1989 there was no "third way" between the bankrupt state-socialist dictatorial model of the East and the relatively successful mixed economy, pluralist, liberal-democratic model of the West. Furthermore, they argue that after nearly 60 years of dictatorial rule East German society was ill-prepared to master a transition to democracy which would not end in new disappointment and an anti-democratic backlash. After all, the forces of the Ancien régime were still very powerful in November/December 1989. They tried to adjust to the new situation and consolidate. Seen from this perspective, the national turn helped the East German revolution in that it provided an acceptable way - and perhaps the only one - to overcome the poisoning heritage of an authoritarian past, and to secure basic liberal-democratic accomplishments which, without unification, would have been highly endangered or at least very slow. Seen from this perspective, unification is the ultimate vehicle to accomplish the integration of East Germany into the orbit of Western political culture, into which West Germany has successfully grown over the last decades. For many who are not particularly impressed by national aspirations as such, this could be the historical justification for German unification.

In 1989, the failure of communism became obvious and irreversible. This meant not only the end of dictatorship, but also the end of an impressive world-historical experiment with tremendously high human costs but which had once raised equally high human hopes and aspirations. One may feel ambivalent about this.

1989 brought a thorough re-affirmation of the national principle and the nation state in Eastern and Central Europe. What it means remains to be seen. Nationalist passions continue to have divisive, destructive and explosive potentials. Probably, the unification of Europe has become more difficult. Peace has not become safer in Europe. Now, in 1992, bloody warfare is back in south eastern Europe, the lines on the map are being redrawn, right-wing extremism and violence has re-emerged in some countries, e.g. in Germany and fears are rising again.

Still, in 1989 we learned that national and liberal-democratic policies can be compatible with and reinforce each other. And it was to be learnt from the revolutions of 1989 that the desire for national autonomy can be reconciled with a passionate longing for "a return to Europe."

German unification has largely taken place as an integration of the GDR into the Federal Republic. This process is painful, and not at all finished. It will take decades. Its results will be decisive for

Germany's position in Europe. A new Germany is in the making, and she will hopefully retain the heritage of this revolution: its sense for proportion, its peacefulness, its liberal-democratic and social-democratic thrust, and its strong European inclination.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>A preliminary German version of this essay was published as: "Revolution und Nation 1989. Zur historischen Einordnung der gegenwärtigen Ereignisse." *Tel Aviver Jahrbuch für deutsche Geschichte*. Vol. 19, 1990, pp. 479-499.