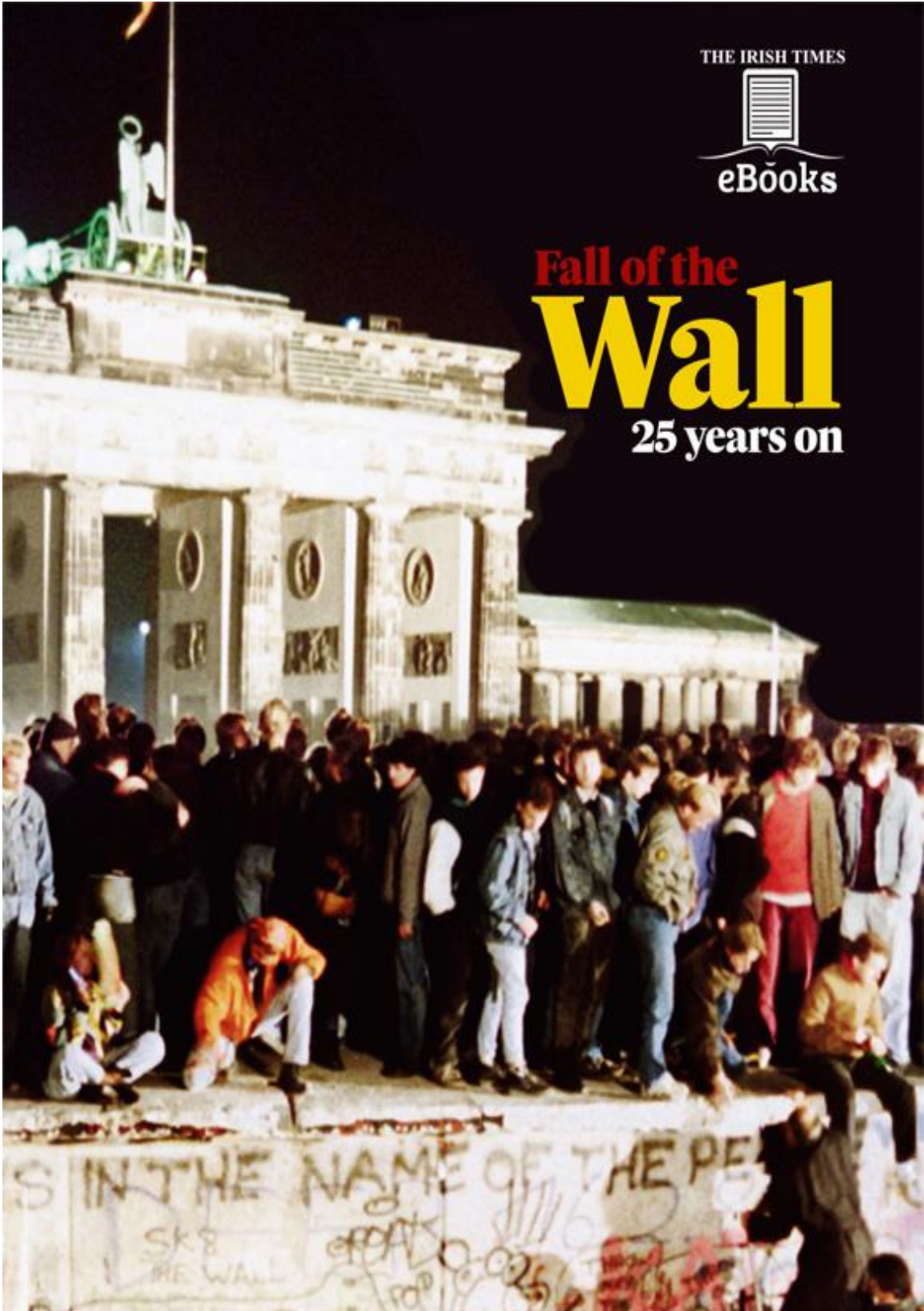


THE IRISH TIMES



Fall of the Wall

25 years on



IRISH TIMES BOOKS

Published by: The Irish Times Limited (Irish Times Books)

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A new Germany at forefront of a new Europe

The fall of the Berlin Wall on November 9th, 1989 was the most dramatic in an extraordinary sequence of events that led to the collapse of communism in central and eastern Europe, the unification of Germany and the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

The Wall had been a monument to the brutality of the communist system and to the failure of diplomacy to resolve the crisis over Berlin in the early 1960s. The peaceful revolution that led to its collapse was a testament to the remarkable courage of a few and to the thirst for freedom of millions of people behind the Iron Curtain.

But it was the leadership of Helmut Kohl that ensured that the fall of the Wall would lead to the reunification of Germany, while the diplomatic efforts of other leaders, notably George HW Bush and Mikhail Gorbachev, that ensured that the new Germany would be embedded in a stable international structure.

It was Kohl's commitment to rooting the new Germany in a politically integrated European Union that helped to assuage fears about a resurgent Germany. The leaders of France and Britain were, like Kohl, from a generation that remembered the second World War and both François Mitterrand and Margaret Thatcher were initially hostile to German unity.

As it turned out, the early years of the reunited Germany were preoccupied with the Herculean challenge of transforming the decaying industrial landscape of East Germany into the blühende Landschaften or "blossoming landscapes" promised by Kohl.

As the euphoria of the fall of the Berlin Wall receded into memory, many easterners felt devalued in the new Germany, where their entire biographies were dismissed as irrelevant, while westerners began to resent the financial cost of unification.

Football had long played an important role in German identity and as Ken Early notes in these pages, the performance of the national team after unification helped to forge a new common identity among easterners and westerners.

Berlin itself, after decades as a cold war frontier city, became Europe's hippest city and a magnet for the young, not just from western Germany but from all over Europe and beyond.

The new Germany showed none of the authoritarian, militaristic or nationalistic characteristics that Thatcher and Mitterrand had feared but its growing wealth and power raised new anxieties. By the start of the global economic crisis in 2008, Germany was the most economically and politically powerful, as well as the most populous member state of the European Union.

Chancellor Angela Merkel threw her country's weight behind an EU-wide policy of fiscal orthodoxy that imposed great economic hardship on peripheral, debt-laden countries such as Greece, Portugal and Ireland and prompted a whole new resentment about Germany's role in Europe.

Some of Berlin's allies would like Germany to take on a greater leadership role, notably in the area of security and defence policy. Others, along with many of Merkel's critics at home, want Berlin to show leadership in Europe by showing greater generosity towards its poorer neighbours.

There is much to criticise in Merkel's Germany, but there is no doubt that the united country that emerged from the rubble of the Berlin Wall is the best Germany there has ever been.

Denis Staunton

WHAT ABOUT THE FALLOUT?

‘We are pleased that German unification is taking place under a European roof’. These words from the conclusions of the European Communities summit in Dublin on April 28th, 1990 were the outcome of intense negotiations over the previous seven months. German and European politics were on the fastest of fast tracks, leaving the most experienced observers dumbfounded by the sheer pace of events. Twenty five years on from them how does that statement stand up? And what are the consequences for the wider world and global politics?

Germany has faced strategic choices about its position in the world since emerging in the early 1950s from direct allied occupation after defeat in the second World War. Would it adopt a western orientation in league with the United States and its then European allies in the new Cold War with the Soviet Union, or opt for a neutral or non-aligned status between these two major antagonists, as proposed by Stalin in 1952? The so-called Westbindung choice was clearly made by Konrad Adenauer’s government against neutrality then. And the form taken by Germany’s western orientation led towards its full participation, first in the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (Nato) from 1955 and then in the process of European integration which commenced with the Rome Treaty in 1957 setting up the European Communities.

This orientation was to last intact until 1989 when the Berlin Wall came down, through successive developments of the EEC and Nato – and taking full account too of the important east-west developments that led to the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), set up in 1975, and of particular importance for Germany’s relations with the Soviet Union and East Germany.

The terms negotiated for German unification after the wall fell renewed and deepened these commitments. As the foreign minister, Hans-Dietrich Genscher, put it to the Western European Union parliamentary assembly in March 1990: “We Germans do not want to go it alone or to follow a separate path. We want to take the European path”. On a wider plane he said: “We seek the process of German unification in the context of EC integration, the CSCE process, East-West partnership for stability, the construction of the common European house and the creation of a pan-European order”.

The concentric circles involved drew in relations with Central and Eastern Europe and with the Soviet Union, so that Genscher could claim that future German policy seeks “dynamically evolving stability for the whole of Europe”. This line of argument survived the subsequent disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991.

The following decades were to see these concentric circles of German geopolitical concern evolve, for the most part surprisingly in tune with the policies laid down 25 years ago. Enlargement of the European Union to take in 10 central and eastern European states in 2004 consolidated a process initiated when German unification was accepted as its first step. This

brought a completely new relationship with many of the states overwhelmed and exploited by Nazi Germany's drive to expand and seize a European living space during the war.

Instead the policy of being at peace with all its neighbours was institutionalised in a sovereignty-sharing arrangement through the European Union. Alongside that, at a quicker pace, came the enlargement of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, pushed by the United States and the UK and supported by Germany despite Russian opposition. "For the first time in its history Germany is surrounded by allies, not enemies, who don't see us as a threat any more," said Hans-Friedrich von Ploetz, state secretary at the foreign office, in November 1997.

Germany's role, through Genscher, in recognising Croatian and Slovenian independence after Yugoslavia broke up echoed some of that earlier history; but for the most part the new relationships were achieved without the historical resentment it could have evoked. That resentment was to return in a different form when the global financial and eurozone crises erupted later in 2008-10, bringing new cleavages to the European Union – North-South, debtor-creditor, core-periphery – different from the East-West ones set off by the end of the Berlin Wall.

Power was certainly not absent from these evolving circles, of course. It was plainly there in the triumphant speed with which Helmut Kohl led the German demand for unification in 1989-90 and delivered it within a year despite initial opposition from François Mitterrand of France and Margaret Thatcher of the UK, and the hostility of left intellectuals like Jürgen Habermas in Germany itself. The swift and brutal overturning of political, social and economic structures in East Germany was partly compensated by agreement on a one-to-one exchange rate for their currencies and by massive subsidies in following years; but resentment continues there too, alongside a certain nostalgia for its non-western past.

The costs of unification cast a long shadow over Europe in the 1990s, as well as absorbing so much of Germany's own surplus. They kept interest rates high in the long run in to the single currency extracted as a condition for unification by France and other states in the 1992 Treaty of Maastricht. Germany's industrial and economic power was used to extend markets throughout the continent and subsidise cohesion policies. There was thus a willingness, when Kohl was chancellor, to take on some of the costs of leadership, within the EU and beyond it.

From the late 1990s, within the commitment to Nato enlargement which copper-fastened the US role in Europe after the end of the Cold War, a growing questioning developed in Germany of precisely what that US role should be and how Europe should relate to the rest of the world, in which it has different interests and priorities to the Americans. This gradual differentiation of policy peaked when Germany refused to be involved in the 2003 invasion of Iraq, along with France and several other EU states. It was related to a growing realisation that Germany has to work with Russia in Europe and cannot afford a confrontation that would jeopardise the availability of that country's huge domestic market for German goods, its position as the largest source of German gas and its valid security concerns about being surrounded by Nato members.

Gerhard Schröder as chancellor from 1998 to 2005 exemplified these trends, not least in his subsequent work for Russian companies. The continuing debate on Ukraine's future, from the Orange revolution of 2004 through to the Maidan revolt of 2013-14 during Angela Merkel's chancellorship, polarised Germany's position against several other central and eastern EU and Nato member-states which felt more threatened by Russia and more in need of security guarantees against it. Germans understood better the idea that Russia needs space to protect its own interests and territorial integrity, quite aside from the question of its authoritarian leadership under Vladimir Putin.

This year's crisis planning over Ukraine posed serious choices for Merkel's Germany on whether to support an assertive US policy of Russian containment and Nato membership for Ukraine rather than the political and economic engagement, together with Ukrainian non-alignment, which better suits Berlin's interests. Observers of the German-US relationship underlined a mood of decidedly reduced discipleship and conflicting geopolitical interests stimulated by a deep-seated outrage over leaked reports of US surveillance of German elite targets.

Where this leads in terms of continuing German commitment to Nato and its willingness to take a more active leadership role in international affairs, along with its EU partners, is as yet unclear. There are many elite voices urging such a more active role, not least from President Joachim Gauck last January. They feel the inhibitions constraining it are now redundant, notwithstanding a public opinion still reluctant to take on too many commitments. But most Germans support a more active EU foreign and security policy, within which Germany would play a more leading role.

This issue overlaps with a wider one concerning Germany's leadership role. International relations specialists debate whether Germany is willing and able to take on the burdens of hegemonic leadership to guarantee stability, as other powers like the US and the UK have done in imperial and post-imperial periods at global levels. Assuming such a role is possible in an emerging world order of multi-polar centres of power – which could take the form of institutionalised regions if the EU model is followed or has influence in Asia, Africa or Latin America – several patterns are possible.

Economically, this would see Germany supply counter-cyclical credit, fund debt write-downs, provide a market of last resort and coordinate macroeconomic policy in return for the benefits of a single currency and continental markets whose governing norms it dominates. Politically it would engage much more as a leader on objectives and ways of achieving them, now more independent of the Franco-German relationship which determined policy-making so much under Kohl and Schröder now attenuated by growing French weakness under Merkel. In security and military terms it would be similarly willing to assert German and European interests and values in the geopolitics of its neighbourhood and further afield, taking account of diminishing British influence pending resolution of the UK's long term relationship with Europe.

All this should be conceived within the regionalist model of the EU rather than separately from it. German ministers and officials insist that the EU provides the foundation for German policy, as its Minister of State for European Affairs Michael Roth put it in Dublin this September. They want to see an EU system in which everyone has their say through consensus and compromise, with smaller states having the opportunity for voice and role. As a social democrat he values balancing EU economic balances with employment, growth and a strong social cohesion dimension. Germany has signalled much greater confidence in policies of the new European Commission led by Jean-Claude Juncker than in the outgoing one led by José Manuel Barroso. This may signal a new willingness to cooperate with Brussels and somewhat less of the inter-governmentalism seen through the eurozone crisis.

But in evaluating Germany's likely future role certain central facts must be recognised clearly. Irish and other debtor states' expectations of writing off debt burdens in a banking union have been disappointed. The creditor states led by Germany have refused to fund such a "transfer union", demanding debts be paid, albeit over a prolonged period. A sound money ideology prioritises strict rules of budgetary balance and competitiveness over economic growth. In a low-trust regime they have so far refused to fund debt write-offs based on promises to behave differently in future.

This policy orientation persists despite the latest news of deflationary expectations in the eurozone, coinciding with poor prospects for the German economy. All this is within a continuing ideological framing of the eurozone crisis as a product of national turpitude in debtor states and the dangers of moral hazard if behaviour does not change. Potential prolonged deflation in the peripheral, indebted south is discounted by German ordoliberal doctrine, as are the depressing effects of such an outcome on the whole European economy, in which Germany's strong exports would be deprived of buoyant markets.

Germany therefore lacks some of the key attributes of regional economic and political leadership. It is rather a geo-economic and commercial power, increasingly aware of its own interests, but reluctant to provide the political and military security normally supplied by regional hegemony and heavily constrained too by its domestic politics for which such costs of leadership are unacceptable.

In these circumstances smaller EU member-states such as Ireland adhere to the new strict eurozone rules and endeavour to align policy with northern creditor states. Hopes of multilateral change on debt relief are not abandoned, but now ride on policy arguments about whether the minimalist banking union regime will be sufficient to ward off another crisis for the euro, arising from popular protest, growing illegitimacy or economic stagnation. All the signs are that it has not done the job.

In that case Germany and the EU will have to choose between the currency's survival and the sound money approach to macroeconomic management, the logic of which would point to eventual German withdrawal from and therefore disintegration of the eurozone. Successive studies show withdrawal would be far too costly for any German government to contemplate.

PAUL GILLESPIE

HOW THE WALL FELL

East Germany ceased to exist four days before its 41st birthday, on the day of German unity: October 3rd 1990. But the emotional end of East Germany came almost a year earlier, on the night of November 9, 1989.

People pressure – not political negotiations – gave the decisive push to topple a hated structure and an unpopular regime facing economic ruin.

By its 40th and last birthday in 1989, East Berlin's ageing Politburo was increasingly isolated in the Soviet-controlled eastern bloc for failing to follow the reform and liberalisation from Moscow.

The economy was failing, with foreign debts at unsustainable levels. Reform demands from increasingly courageous civil rights groups – for freedom of travel, press and association – were belatedly met by new leaders at the end of October 1989, but they came too late.

The historical memory of 1989 is dominated by television images from Berlin on the night of November 9th. But the city's wall only fell then because it was weakened and undermined by courageous people far beyond the divided city.

When Chancellor Angela Merkel talks of 1989, she never fails to mention Germany's courageous neighbours in Poland, in particular the Solidarity union, who, in 1980, were the first to take on on – and eventually topple – the ruling communist party.

In Germany, it is the people of many eastern cities, in particular Leipzig and Dresden, that played the most decisive role in 1989, alongside Berliners.

May 2nd, 1989

Hungary

While East Berlin worked to silence or expel dissenters, the surrounding iron curtain was becoming more porous – not thanks to politicians or civil rights campaigners, but rabbits. For years, Hungarian border guards had complained of up to 4,000 false alarms annually on the rusting border with Austria, usually triggered by wild rabbits and the occasional drunk. In 1988, reformer prime minister Miklós Németh introduced more liberal travel rules and eliminated the budget for maintaining the border signalling system.

The first stretches of barbed wire were dismantled on May 2nd. Six weeks later, images flashed around the world of the Austrian and Hungarian foreign ministers cutting the wire. In the coming weeks, several thousand East German “holidaymakers” occupied Hungarian campsites, churches and the West German embassy in Budapest, refusing to leave.

On August 19th, Austrian MEP Otto von Habsburg, son of the last emperor, initiated the “pan-European picnic”. The plan: to highlight Europe’s divisions through a three-hour border opening between Austria and the Hungarian town of Sopronpuszta.

Over 10,000 people came, including 600 nervous East Germans who refused to go back. It was a touch-and-go moment, with Hungarian authorities unsure how Moscow would react. But no shots were fired, Moscow declined to intervene and the first chink appeared in the Berlin Wall.

“When I started home I noticed the mass of abandoned Trabants with GDR number plates abandoned on the roadside,” recalled Laszlo Nagy, one of the picnic organisers. “Their owners would not return. They left behind everything . . . because freedom has the greatest value.”

After countless “unofficial escapes”, Hungary officially opened its border to Austria for East Germans on September 10th.

May 7th

Election fraud

East Germany presented itself as a multi-party state, with free and fair elections that were neither. Voters were asked whether they were in favour of the so-called “National Front Unity List”, headed by the dominant Socialist Unity Party (SED). Despite boycotts and masses of spoiled votes, results always showed an impressive 99-per cent for the unity list.

For the local elections of May 7th, 1989, an unlikely coalition of pacifists, environmentalists churchgoers and disillusioned former soldiers decided to expose the truth about East German “democracy”.

With no mobile phones or computers, and considerable Stasi surveillance, groups observed counts and pooled data.

This showed seven per cent opposition to the regime’s “unity list”, yet the “official” result claimed 98.85 per cent support. Three days prior to polling day, count centres were given the result they were to report back. Incensed observers lodged 84 separate criminal complaints, but prosecutors were instructed from above to drop the cases and tell the complainants there was “no indication of criminal behaviour”. Some local authorities took revenge on observers who accused them of fraud.

“Three days after the election, the machinery began to roll,” said Hannelore Schneider, one of the observers from Cottbus in Brandenburg.

“We were told we would be thrown out of the country. They told us we were scum and they were happy to be rid of us.”

The real election results were passed onto the West German media and on the 7th of every successive month, observers gathered in cities around East Germany for “whistling” demonstrations, recalling the fraud that broke the ground in the GDR’s grave.

September 30th

Prague embassy

When East Berlin moved to restrict travel to Hungary, East Germans changed their travel plans to take permanent holidays in Czechoslovakia, the only country they could visit without a visa. Hopes of entering Hungary and Austria via this route were dashed when, under pressure from East Berlin, Prague ordered its guards to turn back East Germans at the Czechoslovak-Hungarian border. Unsure of where to go next, the East Germans began climbing the three-metre fence around Lobkowitz Palace, the West German embassy in Prague.

“I said to the porter, ‘I’m a citizen of the GDR and I’m not leaving’,” said Christian Bürger, one of the thousands who came here. By the summer of 1989, a trickle of East Germans had turned to a flood. By September, some 3,500 people were crammed into every room in the embassy, with more in Red Cross tents on the embassy grounds. The toilets were overwhelmed and embassy staff moved around wearing wellies after heavy rain washed faeces from bushes back into the garden.

The ambassador warned Bonn on September 26th that “humane accommodation . . . is no longer possible” for the occupiers. One spark, he warned, could trigger disaster.

Bonn hoped East Berlin would do a deal to prevent the Prague embassy crisis overshadowing its 40th anniversary on October 7th. To expedite matters, West German foreign minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher met Soviet foreign minister Eduard Shevardnadze in New York and described the disastrous conditions in the embassy.

“He asked me if there were children there and when I told him there were many there, he promised immediate help,” said Dr Genscher.

Moscow leaned on East Berlin and when Dr Genscher arrived at the Prague embassy on evening of September 30th, the deal had been done. At 6.58pm, he stepped onto the embassy balcony to deliver the most famous half-sentence in Germany history: “We have come to you today to inform you that today your exit . . .” – euphoric cheers of relief drowned out the rest – “. . . has become possible.”

After the good news, the bad: the trip to West Germany would not be direct but, at SED leader Erich Honecker’s insistence, through East Germany. Mr Genscher, who had just suffered a heart attack and was at risk of another with each passing minute, gave his word they would arrive safely in West Germany and, after some hesitation, the occupiers boarded the trains.

“At that moment, Europe was born again,” said Mr Genscher, now 87, when he revisited the embassy last September. “For me, it was the most beautiful and happiest day of my political career.”

The first of six trains left Prague at 9pm; in all, 6,000 people left Prague in trains that “stank of angst”, according German diplomat Wolfgang Ischinger. Stripped of their passports by East German police, passengers threw their East German money out of windows in protest. In an editorial in Neues Deutschland newspaper, dictated by Honecker, the asylum seekers “trampled over our moral values and sidelined themselves from society. One should not shed a single tear for them.” On October 17th, Honecker was deposed by his SED colleagues. Few tears were shed.

October 6th/7th

Berlin

Honecker’s last hurrah was the 40th anniversary of the GDR, to which all eastern bloc leaders were invited. All efforts were made to paper over a growing chasm between the reformist thaw in Moscow and East Berlin’s ongoing deep freeze. Asked about his recent health problems at Schönefeld airport, Mr Honecker replied: “Totgesagte leben länger”, which can be roughly translated as, “There’s life in the old dog yet.” Ten days, to be precise.

A torchlit parade on the anniversary’s eve, October 6th, was a humiliation for Honecker as blue-shirted youths cheered “Gorbi! Gorbi!”.

To rolling cameras, as a coded message for his hosts, the Soviet leader repeats an old Russian saying: “Danger awaits those who don’t react to life.” A snappier translation soon enters circulation and become the motto of 1989: “Life punishes those who come too late.”

The next morning, after the official parade of marchers and tanks through East Berlin, Gorbachev warns Honecker that “people want a new atmosphere, more oxygen, a new breath”.

“We have only one choice,” he warns Honecker’s Politburo. “Either we move forward or else life will hit back.” Frustrated by the the empty, silent faces, a frustrated Gorbachev stands and leaves. Despite the new icy atmosphere, the anniversary celebrations grind on. The official reception in the Palast der Republik is a macabre affair with an atmosphere, one guest joked later, “like on the Titanic”.

Inside, guests sipped nervously on sweet sparkling wine as a boys’ choir sings Peace in the Land. Outside a 7,000-strong crowd gathers shouting “Gorbi, help us!”, hoping the Soviet leader can force change in East Berlin.

“They all wanted to celebrate and we wanted to add a little soup to their birthday soup,” said Stefan Müller, in the Berlin crowd on October 7th.

When Gorbachev departed, Stasi chief Erich Mielke announced an “end to the humanity”, ordering a violent crackdown that saw demonstrators in a dozen cities from Berlin to Erfurt attacked by police and dragged away to prison. The party was over.

October 7th

Dresden

After the anniversary disaster, Honecker issued an order for police to “prevent further riots before they begin”. Mielke issues orders to activate all 90,000 full-time security officers, their 170,000 secret informers to round up all people who may carry out “anti-social behaviour”.

In Dresden, the local Stasi and police officers lashed out at peaceful protestors, “particularly at women, children and pensioners”, according to a later investigation. When they are brought to a local prison, over 2,000 candle-protesters follow. Back in Dresden city centre, exhausted police struggle to contain a growing, spontaneous demonstration. Protesters only disperse after two Catholic priests secure guarantees from local political leaders to hold talks on freedom of travel and the press.

October 9th

Leipzig

Leipzig’s Monday demonstrations in the 12th- century church of St Nicholas, the Nikolaikirche, began in 1981. After difficult years of apathy, the Moscow thaw boosted attendance at Pastor Christian Führer’s Monday prayer meetings exponentially.

On September 4th, with West German television cameras rolling, Stasi officers ripped away from a young group a banner reading: “For an open life with free people”. On every subsequent Monday the Nikolaikirche – and the streets of Leipzig – were full.

“I remember the amazing feeling one Monday,” recalled Gerd Harry Lybke, a Leipzig gallerist and long-time marcher, “of arriving back at the march starting point and realising the last people hadn’t even left yet.”

On the night of October 9th, around 70,000 gathered to march. Would this date enter the history books alongside other violent crackdowns: 1953 in Berlin, 1968 in Prague or even Tiananmen Square the previous June? Rumours did the rounds: 8,000 police were on standby; in hospitals blood supplies and body bags had been brought in. Clutching their candles, and each other, they began their circuit. Chanting “We are the people” was a direct, peaceful repudiation of the SED’s claim to represent all East Germans.

Police didn’t intervene and the march passed off peacefully. Secretly-filmed television images of East Germany’s largest, peaceful march were broadcast on West German television.

“Without you all, without us, I wouldn’t be standing here today,” said President Joachim Gauck, an East German-born pastor, in Leipzig on that same date this year. Sitting in the Nikolaikirche, Bettina Schuster, one of the protestors from 1989, agreed.

“Without October 9th in Leipzig,” she said, “there would not have been a November 9th in Berlin.”

October 31st

Berlin

After removing Honecker on October 17th, the Politburo, headed by Egon Krenz, received a top-secret economic paper revealing East Germany was on the verge of bankruptcy. Two alternatives were presented. The first: reduce standards of living by 25 per cent, considered political dynamite given the mood on the streets. The second: offer the Berlin Wall as a bargaining chip to Bonn in exchange for 13 billion deutschmarks in loans and enhanced economic co-operation.

Fast-moving events prevented this dubious deal ever coming to fruition. Krenz presented other reform proposals, on free travel and association, but it was too little, too late: the street was setting the pace.

November 4th

Berlin

The East German endgame was now playing out all over the country. In Jena, 10,000 people demonstrated for free elections; in Suhl it was 30,000. In Berlin, half a million braved icy cold to gather on Alexanderplatz to hear speakers, from dissident Marianne Birthler (later custodian of the Stasi files) to actor Ulrich Mühe (later the star of the Stasi drama *The Lives of Others*) share a stage with Stasi foreign intelligence head Markus Wolf.

The battle of ideas and ideology in the speeches was reflected in the slogans on the crowds’ banners, from “40 years are enough” to “No lies – new people”.

Though the Berlin Wall’s fall was just five days away, for the Alexanderplatz crowd it was still unimaginable. Instead, speakers talked about reforming the existing GDR.

“It’s as if someone has opened a window after all the years of stagnation,” declared author Stefan Heym. “After all the years of stagnation, intellectually, economic, political years of dullness and fug.”

The cheers were deafening and civil rights marcher Bärbel Bohley noticed Markus Wolf’s hands trembling as he spoke on the podium.

“When I saw that, I realised we could go home, it was over,” said Ms Bohley, before her death in 2010.

The hopes of groups such as the Neues Forum for a reformed GDR were eventually lost in the rush for free travel and consumerism, and Helmut Kohl's push for German unity. But, for those few hours on Alexanderplatz, a reformed GDR seemed possible. It was, actor Johanna Schall said later, a "euphoric day of discipline and anarchy".

November 9th

Berlin

It was almost 7pm and a dreary press conference was drawing to a close on East Berlin's Mohrenstrasse. Then Günther Schabowski, spokesman for the ruling SED, announced plans for revised travel rules, allowing East German citizens to leave the country. He was unaware of the finer points of the rules, not supposed to be announced until the next day, such as the need for a passport. So when a journalist asked when this new travel regime would apply, he replied: "As far as I can tell, immediately."

What was supposed to be an announcement of reformed travel restrictions was the de facto end of the Berlin Wall. Disbelieving crowds flocked to border crossings, overwhelming uninformed, uniformed guards. Confusion reigned over how Schabowski's remarks were to be interpreted but no one knew what to do. By 11.30pm, the crush at the Bornholmer Strasse checkpoint was so great that guards ended all controls.

After 38 years of ordered division, Germany was effectively united by a joyous surge of revellers.

As a cheering crowd streamed over the Bornholmer crossing to West Berlin, a 36-year-old woman emerged from her weekly visit to the sauna.

She joined the crowd for a few hours in West Berlin but, while the rest of the city danced on the wall through the night, Angela Merkel returned to East Berlin and was at her desk as usual the next morning.

Derek Scally

ROAD TO UNIFICATION

Eleven months between the opening of the Wall and the “day of German unity”, the day when the two Germanys came together formally as West Germany absorbed the German Democratic Republic (GDR) into the fold. In business terms, a takeover not a merger. But, an historic unification that not only transformed Germany but the dynamics and politics of the European Union and played critically into the disintegration of the Soviet Union.

In retrospect it might seem obvious the one had to flow from the other, an inevitability. As night follows day. Far from it, however. The prospect of German unity was regarded by most before the Wall came down as what one historian called simply “preposterous”, a dream that was once essential to the core narrative of the post-War German state, relegated largely to tokenism by the pragmatists who ran Germany, much like the dream of Irish unity is here today.

In 1969 Chancellor Willy Brandt, architect of the policy of co-existence and co-operation between the two states – “Ostpolitik” – had renamed the Ministry for all-German Questions the Ministry for Inter-German Relations to send a clear message that Bonn would not be pressing too vigorously its claim to speak for all Germans. And it did not. According to historian Timothy Garton Ash, while polls taken in the 1950s and 1960s found that up to 45 per cent of the West German population felt unification was the “most important” question of the day, from the mid-70s on, the figure never exceeded 1 per cent.

When the Wall was decisively breached on November 9th there was a deep ambivalence in West Germany about embracing the eastern cousins. In August 1989 the deputy chairman of the German Social Democrats even criticised the Helmut Kohl government for “aggravating” the crisis by welcoming East German refugees who were hoping to come west through the newly opened Hungarian border.

And even after the Wall fell, unity was regarded at home variously as an unrealisable, distant dream, an undesirable loss of identity for citizens of a state for which there was still a lingering attachment, an economic impossibility, an unnecessary provocation to the Soviet Union . . . Abroad, among allies in the EU and in the Soviet Union, attitudes were downright hostile.

Margaret Thatcher told Mikhail Gorbachev bluntly that neither the UK nor Western Europe wanted the reunification of Germany. “We defeated the Germans twice! And now they’re back!” she argued. Yitzak Shamir, Israel’s prime minister, speculated aloud what many did not dare say, that a country that “decided to kill millions of Jewish people . . . will try to do it again”.

It was grossly unfair to a German political leadership of both Christian Democrat and Social Democratic hues that had so firmly put behind itself the country’s Nazi past and had committed themselves wholeheartedly to European integration as a German vocation and a

guarantee it could never return to its past ways. But it reflected a lingering sense among a particular generation of its wartime enemies that a powerful Germany still needed to be restrained. Thatcher was joined by France's Francois Mitterrand and Italy's Giulio Andreotti. The Netherlands' Ruud Lubbers even questioned the German right to self-determination.

But for Helmut Kohl, Germany's conservative chancellor, the breaching of the Wall changed everything. Two weeks later, without consulting his coalition partner, the FDP, he announced a 10-point programme calling for the two Germanys to expand their co-operation with a view to eventual reunification. He was largely alone, even in the East. On the streets of the GDR in Leipzig on October 9th, the intellectuals and pastors who joined together in civic organisations such as New Forum, had been demanding not unification but political liberalisation and basic freedoms.

Initially no timetable was proposed by Kohl. Indeed, in November 1989 he privately warned his advisers that unification might take another five years. However, events rapidly came to a head in early 1990. And the dynamic was encouraged strongly by the US, unconcerned by Germany's history and eager to capitalise on the disintegrating Soviet Union. "The initiative to move faster . . . came from Washington," historian Tony Judt would observe.

On May 18th, 1990, the two Germanys would sign a State Treaty for Currency, Economic, and Social Union. It came into force on July 1st, 1990, with the deutschmark replacing the East German mark on a one-for-one basis as the official currency of East Germany.

A Treaty of Unification would be signed on August 31st, by which the GDR was absorbed into the FRG, as approved enthusiastically by the former's voters in the March 18th elections which became a referendum on Kohl's plans for speedy union.

On September 12th, 1990, the four second World War Allied powers (the US, Britain, France and the USSR) agreed to give up the rights they had exercised over Berlin since 1945, and on October 3rd a sovereign and united Germany came into existence.

Following the so-called Two-Plus-Four agreements (of the two Germanys and the Four Powers) 350,000 Soviet, and later Russian, troops were withdrawn as of 1994, the year in which all four powers also withdrew from Berlin; Germany remained in Nato, with a small presence of foreign (Nato) troops on its soil.

But how did it happen? First and foremost it was the result of a political decision and the political will of Kohl, but fundamental contradictions and weaknesses in the East German economy played a major part. The flow of emigrants from the GDR through Hungary and Czechoslovakia – some 2,000 a day heading west by early 1990, 32,000 by the time the Wall fell – was matched by crowds of demonstrators in the autumn of 1989 beginning to chant "we're staying here", and what they were staying for became more central to the argument about what would come next. That new reality would crystallise by the time Kohl went to Dresden in December, when he was met by huge, enthusiastic crowds now calling for unity.

East Germany for years had been subsidised by the Soviet Union, where fundamental economic reform would lead to a decision to accept only hard currency at world market

prices for its exports, a decision which would precipitate the collapse of Comecon and the GDR. And the GDR had increasingly also been subsidised by West Germany as part of its rapprochement strategy of Ostpolitik. Garton Ash calculates that the total of state-to-state transfers between West and East Germany in the years between 1972 and 1989 was about DM14 billion.

In truth the GDR was broke. Its industries could not compete. According to unpublished estimates by its own experts, it had a foreign debt of \$26.5 billion. Servicing that debt absorbed more than 60 per cent of its yearly export earnings. And with unity, some 80 per cent of East German enterprises proved helplessly uncompetitive and went under. The economic shock to the population would have been catastrophic had Bonn not levied its own people to support unification and exchanged their marks at face value.

But if the prospect of collapse of the GDR economy and growing enthusiasm among East Germans – nearly half of whom backed Kohl's CDU-led "Alliance for Germany" in the March elections – made the project of unity a runner domestically, externally Kohl faced huge challenges. Not least the reality that the EU and Nato would have to approve unanimously the continued membership of a reconfigured Germany. And that was by no means a given – European reaction to Kohl's unannounced road map speech was one of shock.

In truth the Cold War division of Europe had resulted in an equilibrium that many leaders saw as suiting the West. Germany's unification would unbalance it, as British foreign secretary Douglas Hurd would admit candidly as late as December 1989, commenting ruefully that this was a system "under which we've lived quite happily for 40 years".

Gorbachev too, at some political risk to himself, would not come round to full absorption of a united Germany into Nato until meetings with George Bush in May 1990 and with Helmut Kohl in the Caucasus in mid-July. The very hefty cash price paid by Germany to the Soviet Union made it easier. Gorbachev, Judt has noted, tried at first to hold the unification negotiations hostage for a ransom of \$20 billion, before finally settling for approximately \$8 billion, together with \$2 billion more in interest-free credits.

The key EU leaders would also come round eventually, crucially at a summit in Dublin where a deal was brokered in part as a result of then taoiseach Charles Haughey's strong support as EU president for unity, later warmly acknowledged by Kohl. Mitterrand was quicker than Thatcher to recognise the inevitability of unity, however unfortunate from his point of view, and to begin to articulate a price for Germany that would involve it binding itself economically ever more tightly into the EU.

Kohl, together with foreign minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher, understood that they had to commit Germany to the creation of economic and monetary union, whatever reservations the powerful Bundesbank might feel. The chancellor, to his credit, let it be remembered, argued strongly that a monetary union would need a fiscal and therefore also a political union to accompany it; but Mitterrand and Andreotti were having none of it. The idea, as Judt put it was "that they should get a handle on Germany's currency, not that Germany should get a

handle on their national budgets”. And we have paid a heavy price for that political opportunism in the recent crisis.

The price of German unity for the EU would ultimately be German commitment to the euro and the treaties of Maastricht, Amsterdam and Nice.

Twenty-five years after the unification process was launched, Germany is now the richest, most populous state in Europe – it has both absorbed huge costs of unification and transformed its economy into the powerhouse of the EU. Its political and economic leadership remains more crucial than ever. Indeed, in 2011 Poland’s foreign minister, Radek Sikorski, observed that “I will probably be the first Polish foreign minister in history to say so, but here it is: I fear German power less than I am beginning to fear German inactivity.”

Francois Mitterrand’s and Margaret Thatcher’s heirs would find it difficult not to agree.

Patrick Smyth

LIFE BEFORE THE FALL

Formative years in a city of edgy creativity

In August 1986, 25 years after the Berlin Wall was built and just three years before it came down, the West Berlin radio station I was working for sent me onto the Kurfürstendamm to do a vox pop. How many West Berliners thought the Wall would still be standing in another 25 years? After a couple of hours stopping passers-by, I couldn't find one who believed the Wall would be gone in their lifetime. I got the feeling that most of them wanted life inside their walled enclave to stay just the way it was, and I didn't blame them.

I had arrived in the city the previous year aged 24, with no money and few apparent prospects after an abandoned Classics degree and a short, forgettable career as a professional actor. I did have an introduction to a man called Peter Leonhardt Braun, the head of documentaries at Sender Freies Berlin, the city's public service broadcaster. He decided that the brief history of disappointment and underachievement that was my life thus far was so gripping a story that it must be shared with the broader public. He would arrange for me to be interviewed on the radio and listeners would be so impressed that they would call up to offer me work and a place to live and I would be on my way. In fact, there was an English language station across the street, so why didn't I go over and see if they too would like to interview me about my extraordinary life?

I had my doubts, but as I made my way across the street they were pushed out of the way by the force of flattery and my growing sense that Herr Braun was probably right and I really did have an amazing story to tell. The English radio station manager listened quietly as I spun it out, enjoying the sound of my own voice all the more as it went on until I realised I was losing his attention and I finally stopped.

"Well we don't want to interview you, obviously," he said. "But I think we can offer you a job".

I enjoyed the serious-sounding title of Senior Reporter but my main function was to interview visiting celebrities (an elastic category, then as now) and to report on entertainment and nightlife, including a review of bars and nightclubs broadcast live from the location during the daily breakfast show. This meant that most of my life was lived at night within a West Berlin subculture that stayed out all night, every night.

After the Wall went up in 1961, most of West Berlin's big business and heavy industry, patriotic and civic-spirited as ever, fled to West Germany and many workers followed suit. To prevent further population decline, the government in Bonn poured massive subsidies into West Berlin, much of it into construction – and into the hands of corrupt public officials and developers. An enclave of western democracy and the free market system surrounded by communist East Germany, West Berlin was also a showcase for the western system.

Travel between West Germany and West Berlin was cumbersome, with just four transit roads through East Germany, which started and ended with intimidating border checks, limited air

connections and rail journeys interrupted by inspections by armed border police. Two measures in particular helped to make the city attractive to a certain kind of young German – the abolition of the *Polizeistunde*, or statutory closing time, for bars and clubs soon after the Wall went up and the exemption from military service for young Germans living in West Berlin.

Low rents, especially in the districts closest to the Wall, and the easy availability of part-time work meant that if you worked two or three nights a week in a bar, you earned enough to live modestly but comfortably. Even part-time staff in the more fashionable places could become celebrities and if they had an interesting look, minor cult figures. Bar staff not only drank free themselves but could offer their friends (and staff from other bars) free drinks all night so it sometimes seemed that nobody was paying for anything at all.

The lack of economic pressure and the sense of being cut off from the surrounding world encouraged creative experimentation, free from any ambition to be professional or successful. Groups like *Die Tödliche Doris* produced music, art and performances without any consideration for the financial value of the final product or critical approval. Art and nightlife in West Berlin were entangled, with many of the most interesting artists working in bars and clubs. Some opened their own places, such as *Kumpelnest 3000*, where the wonderful, deaf waiter Gunter Trube held sway – and chose the music. *Exil*, a Viennese restaurant in Kreuzberg, was run by the Austrian writer and critical theorist Oswald Wiener. And *Anderes Ufer*, the first openly gay venue in Germany to leave its door open and allow the guests inside to be seen through a window from the street, transformed its interior décor completely for a new exhibition every month.

Despite the perfect conditions for creativity, most of the idlers I knew in West Berlin were not producing any art, or even pretending to be. Most just focused on living, enjoying the freedom the city offered to make up life as you went along. This was especially true for those of us who were gay, for many of whom West Berlin provided the first experience of living openly and happily as ourselves. Most Germans live in small towns of fewer than 100,000 people and West Berlin was full of young gay men from such places, which were still deeply conservative in the 1980's. Unlike its Anglo-Saxon equivalent, German gay culture remains rooted in its century-long history and each generation absorbs some of the cultural memories of its predecessors. So in the 1980s, when only a very special kind of young gay American still thrilled to the sound of Judy Garland or the Broadway musical theatre, every gay German in his 20s knew all the songs of Marlene Dietrich and Zarah Leander, to say nothing of the squealing 1970s Schlager of Marianne Rosenberg. You could spend all your time just being gay in West Berlin and many did, working in gay places, hanging out with gay friends and meeting an awful lot of gay strangers.

Germans living in West Berlin seldom visited East Berlin. You crossed on foot through Checkpoint Charlie or by the S Bahn railway through Friedrichstrasse Station, past grim, unsmiling border guards. The excitement was greater if you were carrying contraband, as I often was, usually in the form of books or music for people I knew in the East. The music of

The Smiths was a particular favourite and I usually had a couple of cassettes of their mournful hits hidden somewhere on my way over.

Levi jeans and Dr Marten boots were also highly prized so one often crossed into the East wearing layers of clothes, to return later wearing some frayed replacements you had picked up over there. You had to be back in the West by midnight but there was usually time for a raucous session in one of the bars in Prenzlauer Berg, often ending in a deep, pointless conversation about politics. We usually agreed that both capitalism and state socialism had their pros and cons but we all knew without saying anything on which side of the Wall we'd prefer to be living.

I left West Berlin for London in 1988 and when I moved back two years later, it was gone, and so was my idle youth. The centre of Berlin shifted eastwards, Prenzlauer Berg and Mitte became the favoured districts for young Germans from the west and the old club scene of West Berlin was overtaken by vast new temples of Techno in the East.

The more dynamic of my West Berlin friends moved eastwards too and, a little older now, were happy to embrace the new opportunities to get rich and make a name for themselves. During the next 10 years that I lived in Berlin, always in the west of the city, I'd sometimes look around and ask myself where everyone had gone. Many of the expatriates left Berlin altogether, to return to New York or California or to find a new adventure somewhere else. But it took me a while to realise that many of the old faces from West Berlin's nightlife had vanished because they were dead.

Many parents learned that their sons, some still in their 20s, were gay the same day they heard they were dying. Many of those who stayed in Berlin to die are buried in a small cemetery in Schoeneberg, which I occasionally visit when I go back there. When I do, I think about the short, insubstantial, unremembered lives of so many who shone so brightly at night all those years ago and how, like West Berlin itself, it's now as if they'd never been there at all.

DENIS STAUNTON

Life as part of an ongoing social experiment

The more I think about the last 25 years, the more it seems like an experiment.

There are two main kinds of experiments. In one you have a hypothesis and the experiment either confirms the hypothesis or not.

But there is a second way of conducting an experiment: an exploratory style where you are not sure what you are doing, you don't know what you don't know and you simply go forward, gathering knowledge.

This is the more typical type of experiment today in science and politics. In my experience it is how we got through the 1989 period and the years since: a long-term, exploratory-style experiment.

My earlier life in the GDR also felt like an experiment, an experiment that attempted to stop time. All utopias – positive and negative – share this characteristic of wanting to abolish watches. Utopias insist nothing must change and this is why they are at odds with the realities of life. Time moves on, you have children and you get older. Yet for me, the GDR was an attempt to create a state like a chunk of crystal, where everything was frozen, everything stood still.

When I think back to 25 years ago, I begin thinking of how quickly western concepts of law, justice and legal language forced its way into the political debate. The GDR, its legal system and language were no longer needed, particularly after the victory for Germany political unity.

In hindsight, I think this was a mistake, a misjudgment that continues to cause problems today. For instance, we are still debating in Germany whether or not the GDR was an Unrechtsstaat, a state without a legal basis. It's a debate that keeps recurring, most recently in the past weeks.

Of course we had law in the GDR, any legal counsel will confirm that. But is that how we judge law and justice? The real question is what rights a GDR citizen had in their dealings with the state? Could an individual take on the state, or defend themselves against the state? Did this individual have a right to do so and have even a chance of getting justice?

Looked at from this angle, the GDR looks quite different. And, as long as we judge regimes by their least flattering side, then the GDR wasn't a state based on the rule of law. After all, we don't judge the Nazi era through its autobahns but through Auschwitz.

When I think of 1989, I also think of the idea of mergers. Officially, unification in 1990 was a merger between West and East Germany. But, to view it as a caricature, German unification was a merger between an elephant and hedgehog of which one of two things can emerge: elephant or an hedgeant.

The elephog is a strange beast with a hedgehog's tail, and that small pointy bit that is, for me, the first half of my life in the GDR. The bulky front half, the Eleph, is what I have experienced since 1989: an unbelievable acceleration and enlargement of life in the united Germany. This elephog is, in my opinion, a rare animal native to the old East Germany.

The other animal that can emerge from such a merger is the hedghant. This animal is more at home in western Germany, where I lived for a time. It is a malicious being because it questions a basic axiom of German unity, namely that the GDR is over. I think this is a reason why we are still talking about the GDR because, though it is legally gone, it lives on in one crucial point: mentality.

The GDR will continue to live on, I think, in the ways of performing bureaucracy, in wanting to make everything equal and in an obsession with ordering things. These needs are not unique to the GDR, they are eternal human qualities, but I would argue they found stronger expression in East Germany. They came to the surface in East Germans' awareness of the power they had, and how they used and abused this power.

That brings us to the issue of pride. My generation, today aged 45-50, were lucky because we could start again with our lives ahead of us. But my parents' generation paid a high price. They had invested more in the GDR so I understand their pride in the state and how its demise undermined their pride.

When I look back, I think their pride was based on a pride in being able to repair almost anything. In this economy of scarcity, the GDR and perhaps the whole socialist bloc was Europe's largest repair shop. The genius of the people lay in the tricks they thought up to make broken things work again. Their pride was rooted in their talent for improvisation. I remember we had a genius plumber who installed in our house a coke-burning furnace of his own creation that pumped hot water into every room. Every visitor from West Germany always took pictures of that furnace.

Every driver of the East German Trabant knew that, if the fan belt tore, a woman in the car took off her tights to use them as a replacement belt – a trick that only worked in the Trabant. But the year 1989-90 meant that, at a stroke, this genius for repairs was no longer in demand. Why repair a broken fridge if you can buy a new one? And so this repair genius, this pride in repairing and improvising that was an achievement of easterners, was now surplus to requirements.

Sometimes I wish East Germany had ended a different way. I know there are people here in Germany, particularly in the arts scene, who say socialism was a good idea that was badly implemented. To this I always wonder: why is it that this good idea is always implemented by those who will do so badly?

There are times I wish the GDR hadn't had such a soft landing, but more like what the Romanians and Czechs experienced. A tougher collapse would have put a stop to the old East German legends, trotted out from the old GDR gang who are still there, people who often draw larger pensions today than the people they ruled over.

When I think of the state of East Germany's economy towards the end, I recall my time working in our second-largest mine for lignite, the GDR's main source of energy.

I remember a friend pointing out to me: "That over there is the hill for 1990, there is the pile for 1991, and then it's over. What will we do then?" It was over. Economic data for the East German economy in 1989 shows the country had a productivity rate of 15 per cent compared to West Germany. Today we have made enormous progress and, if you take a step back and leave ideology aside, the oft-cited blossoming landscapes, mentioned back in 1989 by Helmut Kohl, have come to pass.

Why do we Germans keep thinking about the "Wende", the turn we took in those years in 1989-90? Perhaps because such a transformation is a permanent process of transformation that keeps recurring; just look at the Arab world.

For all the problems we had, the Wende of 1989/90 passed off well, without violence. All sides kept their heads, something that is important to recognise.

A Wende, a turning point of history, has to do with hope. So much goes wrong in life, but this didn't go wrong. Given how much has gone wrong in German history, I sometimes wonder whether this Wende really was our history. But it was, and it is, a turn for the better.

Uwe Tellkamp, born in Dresden in 1968, is a German physician and a celebrated writer. As an East German soldier he was imprisoned for refusing to break up a demonstration in October 1989. His novel *Der Turm* (The Tower) won the German Book Prize for its description of a middle-class family in 1980s Dresden, disintegrating in parallel with the regime around it.

Uwe Tellkamp

HOW THE WALL WAS BUILT

Like its collapse 28 years later, the construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961 was precipitated by a flood of refugees from east to west but that exodus was triggered by a succession of bungled diplomatic manoeuvres. At the end of the second World War in 1945, the four victorious allied powers – the United States, the Soviet Union, Britain and France – had put Germany under joint occupation, with each administering a zone of the country. Berlin, which was 176km inside the Soviet zone, was also under joint allied authority, with each of the four powers governing a sector.

After the establishment of the Federal Republic of Germany in the west and the communist German Democratic Republic in the east, Berlin was an anomaly and the Soviets were eager to incorporate the city into their German satellite state. They tried to drive the western allies from Berlin in 1948 by blocking access from West Germany by road and rail but the allies kept the western sectors of the city supplied with food and other necessities through an airlift lasting more than a year.

By the late 1950s, Soviet leader Nikita Krushchev had launched a diplomatic offensive aimed at international recognition of the East German communist state and the transformation of Berlin into a demilitarised “free” city. At a summit in Vienna on June 4th, 1961, Krushchev issued an ultimatum to president John F Kennedy, threatening to unilaterally dissolve the four-power agreement over Berlin and to hand over to East Germany control of transit routes to the city from the west unless there was a deal within six months.

Kennedy made clear his commitment to defending the western sectors of the city but not the special status of Berlin as a whole, a message he and senior US officials reinforced in the weeks after.

Fears that the border would be sealed had prompted growing numbers of East Germans to cross into the west during the early months of 1961 and the flow of migrants, many of them highly skilled, now turned into a torrent, with more than 1,000 a day arriving at a reception centre in Marienfelde. East German leader Walter Ulbricht had long been pressing Kruschchev to allow him to stem the flow of refugees by sealing off West Berlin and had been stockpiling building materials and barbed wire.

At midnight on Saturday, August 12th, 1961, East German police started erecting barbed wire around the 156km circumference of West Berlin and, by morning, the western sectors of the city were sealed off. The Soviets had suggested the use of barbed wire so that the barriers could be removed quickly if there was an aggressive response from western allied forces. Once it was clear the US and its allies were willing to accept the partition of Berlin, the barbed-wire barrier was reinforced with a second, parallel fence and finally replaced by a concrete wall, 3.6m high. Over the years, the wall was strengthened so that by the time it was removed in 1989, it was fortified with death strips, anti-vehicle trenches and dog runs, and overseen by 116 watchtowers.

DENIS STAUNTON

GENERATION UNIFICATION

When Raphael Moser and Julia Wenzel say “I do” on December 12th, they’ll be doing their bit for German unification – not that the young couple have really thought about it that way. We’re sitting in a cosy cafe on Berlin’s Karl Marx Allee that couldn’t be more of a contrast to the austere Stalinist architecture outside, built by an East German regime neither ever knew.

Raphael and Julia, just back from a year studying in Dublin, are part of Germany’s “Generation Einheit”, the so-called “unity generation” born around 1989. A quarter-century on, how does this generation view their country’s divided past – and how will they carry this history they never knew into the future?

“I’m definitely proud of my eastern German identity, but the whole East-West Ossi-Wessi thing really doesn’t figure for me,” said Julia. She was born in December 1988 in the East German Democratic Republic (GDR), just as people pressure for change was building through growing numbers of meetings and marches.

“My mother took me to Monday marches as a baby, that was very important for her,” she said. “But East Germany was only a topic in school after we asked our teachers about it.”

Raphael was born in November 1990 in a town near the Black Forest in the southwest of what a month earlier was still West Germany.

“My western German identity isn’t that big a deal for me, perhaps because I’ve never felt I’ve had to defend where I come from,” he says. Where he agrees with his fiancée: the “East-West thing” is not a relevant or noticeable factor in his life or world view. Growing up near France and Switzerland, those countries were more prominent in his family’s minds and conversations than any talk, positive or negative, about the other Germany.

Julia grew up in a Lutheran pastor family, meaning conflict with the East Berlin regime were part of her family’s daily life. With her studies, however, she’s moved around and lived in all of Germany, east and west, north and south. On her travels she’s seen other cultural differences just as striking than the old East-West divide: the division between the cooler northern Germans and more jovial southern Germans. And then there’s the matter of faith: she’s Lutheran, Raphael’s Catholic.

All these factors, rather than just East-West, were hanging in the air the first time they met each other’s parents. What could have been an awkward Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner? evening was, they said, unremarkable. Neither introduced their other half as an eastern or a westerner, just said where they came from.

For many younger Germans, it seems, regional identities are more relevant and tangible than old Cold War blocs.

Curiously, there are no reliable numbers tracking whether Julia and Raphael's marriage is part of a growing trend. Some newspaper articles mention how East-West couples comprise less than 10 per cent of the total, without mentioning whether they got their numbers. A recent dating website survey claims one in five Germans has had at least one East-West relationship since unification.

But Germany's statistics office say it holds no information on East-West marriages: it only collates where a couple marries, not where they're from. Even if there is no way of quantifying how many – or how few – such East-West couples now exist Julia suggests that the figure is probably quite low because of Germany's sheer size: over four times the size of the island of Ireland.

"I think the main reason there aren't more East-West couples is that people aren't mobile and stick to their region, not because there are East-West incompatibilities," says Julia.

Seeing the other's Germany has been an education, particularly for Raphael.

"I was surprised how pretty cities were and was amazed I'd never heard before of places like Schwerin, with its pretty palace," he said.

Besides marriage, anecdotal evidence suggests a small but growing number of western German students are moving east to study for pragmatic reasons: many eastern states, unlike in the west, have not yet introduced university fees.

Oliver Müller Lorey, 22, moved east to Halle because, he said, the universities in his hometown of Düsseldorf and nearby Cologne were expensive and overcrowded.

"My friends and family were surprised and still make fun of me, asking if they should bring bananas when they visit," he jokes. Living in Halle has opened his eyes when he visits Düsseldorf. "I now see what people here mean, that western Germans are more arrogant and egoistic than here," he says. "You see it in little things, like how they behave in traffic. I'd say our generation is closer together than previous East- West ones, but I think it will still take a will to bridge differences in attitude."

That is reflected in a survey of eastern identity by Germany's Allensbach Institute, suggesting the identification with the former east was stronger as respondents got older.

While eastern grandparents, the 60-plus generation, are evenly divided over whether they feel "German" or "eastern German", three quarters of 16-29 year olds living in the former East feel more "German", with one in five feeling more "eastern German".

Despite a shift to a unified Germany identity, some of the "unity generation" still see points of difference, for instance that a united Germany is still dominated by western German elites.

"Anytime you point that out you hear, 'but you have an eastern chancellor and president', but those are still the exceptions not the rule," said Sabine Rennefanz, a "unity generation" writer, in Die Zeit newspaper. "We have to be more political, get involved . . . in the recent

election I found it sad that eastern Germany played no major role, perhaps we were simply too quiet.”

Ask older western Germans and many say it’s striking how quiet the “unity generation” has been.

“Beyond sporadic critical flashes, I see no consequential clash between the younger generation and their parents,” said Mr Andres Veiel, who’s made films about West Germany’s left-wing terror organisations, an off-shoot of the 1968 generation and their attack on their parents and a perceived continuity between the Third Reich and the Bonn Republic.

“East Germany lacked legitimacy on many levels but it didn’t have an Auschwitz,” said Mr Veiel. “So perhaps the need for the younger eastern German generation to deal critically with the eastern German history, to challenge their parents, is of a different order.”

Many “unity generation” members say they’ve not hit out at their parents for keeping their heads down in East Germany because many saw first-hand after 1989 how these same parents struggled to make ends meet. Now 25 and struggling to find full-time paying work and to start families, many have little energy to judge their parents’ decisions.

Instead Germany’s unification generation has moved beyond the Berlin Wall, celebrating with a new lightness both their regional identities and, when the opportunity arises, their national achievements.

It was the “unity generation”, after all, of Thomas Müller and Toni Kroos that brought home the World Cup for a party at the Brandenburg Gate. What was once a death strip is, for this generation, the public living room where, as Willy Brandt predicted in 1989, “what belongs together, grows together”.

In World Cup fever, the crowd sang along to Germany’s big summer hit, Ein Hoch auf Uns, now an anthem to Germany’s Unity Generation: “Here’s to what unites us: this era/Here’s to us, now and forever/to an everlasting day.”

Derek Scally

1989'S OTHER REVOLUTIONS

At a remove of 25 years, many people remember the collapse of communism in eastern Europe starting with the fall of the Berlin Wall.

But by the time that barrier was breached on November 9th 1989, much of the metaphorical mortar had already been chipped from between the pieces of the Soviet bloc. Now the blows joyous protesters rained down on the wall sound like a belated death knell for a system already rotten to the core.

Can a prime mover be found, a lightning bolt or tiny spark that lit the fire that would raze what seemed until autumn 1989, to most westerners, a vast, monolithic and mighty edifice fiercely defended by the Kremlin and its local allies?

The elements of revolution were myriad – economic, political, social, cultural – and that year they swirled together in an irresistible storm, just as falling leaves and then snowflakes blew over the crowds who packed the avenues and squares of Warsaw, Budapest and Prague, Bucharest, Sofia and Berlin.

Some historians have identified Mikhail Gorbachev, who became Soviet leader in 1985, as the greatest hero of this drama.

Just as Gorbachev's policies of restructuring ("perestroika") and openness ("glasnost") created room for reform in the Soviet Union, so what was jokingly called his "Sinatra doctrine" invited the satellite states to do things "their way".

This seemed to lift the threat that the Red Army would be used to crush attempts at liberalisation, as it had in Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968.

For another key figure in the fall of communism, however, Gorbachev's role has been overstated, and a very different man inspired the changes that culminated in the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the totalitarianism that it symbolised.

Lech Walesa has called his creation of the Solidarity trade union with colleagues in Poland's Baltic dockyards – the first such non-communist organisation in the Soviet bloc – the crucial turning point. And it could not have happened way back in 1980, Walesa has insisted, without the arrival in the Vatican two years earlier of Pope John Paul II, the Polish pope who on his first visit to Warsaw as pontiff in 1979 inspired dissidents by calling on the Holy Spirit to "renew the face of the Earth, the face of this land."

Walesa said "the first wall to fall was pushed over in 1980 in the Polish shipyards. Later, other symbolic walls came down, and the Germans, of course, tore down the literal wall in Berlin. The fall of the Berlin Wall makes for nice pictures. But it all started in the Gdansk shipyards.

“The European Union couldn’t have expanded, the unification of Germany would not have been possible. And other countries wouldn’t have got their freedom if the Poles had not broken the Soviet bear’s teeth. When other countries did their own thing, the bear could no longer bite.”

In 1989, when the world watched and wondered whether Soviet jaws would again bite down on eastern Europe, Poland was blazing a trail for reform. On April 4th, two months of “round table” talks between Warsaw’s communist government and opponents ended with a historic deal: Solidarity was legalised and would be allowed to take part in partly free parliamentary elections in June.

The vote delivered a shattering verdict on the legitimacy of communist rule, with Solidarity winning almost every seat that was up for free election.

With the ruling party in deepening disarray, two previously supine “coalition” groups abandoned it, a move that piled huge pressure on president Wojciech Jaruzelski to appoint a new prime minister from Solidarity. He bowed to the pressure, and on August 24th Tadeusz Mazowiecki, a Catholic writer and dissident, became the Soviet bloc’s first non-communist prime minister for more than 40 years.

Five days earlier, on the border between Hungary and Austria, another remarkable event had torn a strip from the Iron Curtain.

Otto von Habsburg – an Austrian politician who had been the last crown prince of his family’s empire – and reform-minded Hungarian communist Imre Pozsgay organised a “pan-European picnic” close to where their countries’ foreign ministers had in June cut through the barbed wire fence along the border.

In intimation of what the European Union would bring to the region 18 years later, the frontier was opened for three hours to allow people to join the picnic and fleetingly enjoy the freedom to cross between the continent’s east and west.

In the ferment of that summer, however, the event attracted more than just local picnickers. Hungary was then playing host to tens of thousands of East Germans who, as well as enjoying a holiday at Lake Balaton, where many reunited annually with west German friends and relatives, now saw the rapidly changing country as a possible escape route to western Europe.

The picnic, and its brief open-border policy, provided the first chance to test Hungary’s attitude, and about 600 East German men, women and children made a dash across the frontier to Austria. No shots were fired and no chase ensued; decades of fear started to trickle away and people pushed harder at an old order that now lacked the will and the power to fight.

Three weeks later, Hungary threw open the border and some 60,000 East Germans flooded into Austria, with most continuing on to West Germany and prompting many more of their compatriots to seek ways to escape the country.

The day after Germany was reunified in October 1990, then chancellor Helmut Kohl said: “It was in Hungary that the first stone was removed from the Berlin Wall.”

Hungary’s relatively moderate communist rulers were already chasing Poland down the reform path, allowing free trade unions, political association, independent media and entering talks with new opposition parties.

In June, former prime minister Imre Nagy – who had been hanged after the 1956 Soviet crackdown on liberalisation – was reburied with great ceremony in Budapest.

At their last conference, in October, the communists changed their name to become the Hungarian Socialist Party, and parliament passed laws providing for multiparty elections. A revised constitution was agreed and, on October 23rd – the anniversary of the start of the 1956 uprising – a new Republic of Hungary was officially declared.

In Bulgaria the following day, foreign minister Petar Mladenov resigned with a letter lambasting Todor Zhivkov, the country’s feared ruler for 35 years.

Mladenov told Bulgaria’s politburo Zhivkov had “led our country into a deep economic, financial, and political crisis.

“He knows that his political agenda, which consists of deviousness and petty intrigues and is intended to keep himself and his family in power at all costs and for as long as possible, has succeeded in isolating Bulgaria from the rest of the world.”

Zhivkov had appalled the West and alienated many domestic and Soviet bloc allies by systematically persecuting Bulgaria’s large ethnic Turkish community, some 300,000 of whom fled the country for Turkey in 1989.

Mladenov and other officials, who admired Gorbachev’s stance and were well aware of the changes sweeping through eastern Europe, decided it was time to act.

“I think that we all understand that the world has changed and that, if Bulgaria wants to be in tune with the rest of the world, it will have to conduct its political affairs in a modern way,” Mladenov wrote, urging the politburo to address burning questions that “the public took up . . . long ago and now discusses . . . openly.”

Much of this discussion was channelled through an environmental group called Ecoglasnost, which quickly took up broader issues of civic rights and democracy to become a major movement spearheading the drive for radical reform.

Having secretly secured the backing of Gorbachev, Mladenov and allies persuaded other politburo members that Zhivkov had to go if Bulgaria was to stave off massive social unrest and implement changes peacefully.

On November 10th, Zhivkov was forced to step down, and the following month his successor Mladenov declared that Bulgaria’s one-party system was at an end, and free elections would be held the following year.

A week after Zhivkov resigned, tens of thousands of Czechoslovaks, most of them students, marched through Prague carrying placards calling for reform. Riot police attacked the peaceful rally, injuring scores of people and sparking rumours – which turned out to be false – that a protester had been killed.

The violence fuelled public anger, swelling demonstrations in Prague and forging a mass movement that united students, workers, intellectuals and religious groups in demands for sweeping change. At the forefront was a group called Civic Forum, which grew out of the dissident Charter 77 movement of intellectuals led by playwright Vaclav Havel.

Inspired by the upheaval around the region and particularly the fall of the Berlin Wall, Czechoslovaks rallied behind Havel, calling mass marches and strikes that forced communist leader Milos Jakes and his politburo to resign on November 24th.

Huge protests continued, forcing the ruling party to give up attempts at cosmetic change and relinquish its monopoly.

On December 10th a new government was sworn in. Most of its members were not communists, and several were dissidents like Havel who for years had been harassed, arrested and jailed for criticising the officials they now replaced.

A fortnight later Alexander Dubcek – the former Czechoslovak leader who was expelled from the communist party after the Soviets crushed the 1968 liberalisation drive known as the Prague Spring – was named parliamentary speaker.

The following day, the still mostly communist legislature elected Havel as president, capping a political transformation of stunning speed, even by the extraordinary standards of 1989.

“The recent period – and in particular the last six weeks of our peaceful revolution – has shown the enormous human, moral and spiritual potential, and the civic culture that slumbered in our society under the enforced mask of apathy,” Havel told Czechoslovaks in his new year’s address.

“Everywhere in the world people wonder where those meek, humiliated, sceptical and seemingly cynical citizens of Czechoslovakia found the marvellous strength to shake the totalitarian yoke from their shoulders in several weeks, and in a decent and peaceful way.”

As Czechoslovaks celebrated their Velvet Revolution, Romania was reeling from chaotic events that were neither decent nor peaceful. On Christmas Day, communist dictator Nicolae Ceausescu and his wife Elena had been executed by firing squad at a military base near the town of Targoviste. They had been caught after fleeing the capital Bucharest with a few close aides on December 22nd, escaping in a helicopter from the roof of communist party headquarters as furious crowds stormed the building.

By then, what had begun as a protest in the western town of Timisoara against the threatened eviction of an outspoken Hungarian pastor, Laszlo Tokes, had grown into major rallies across the country demanding the end of Ceausescu’s rule.

Increasingly isolated and megalomaniacal after 24 years in power, Ceausescu had bankrupted and half-starved his country and relied on the fearsome Securitate and its vast network of agents and informers to maintain control.

On December 17th, the Securitate and army units moved to crush the revolt in Timisoara, and dozens of people were shot dead.

The unrest only spread to other cities, however, prompting powerful communist party members to abandon Ceausescu and establish a National Salvation Front (NSF), which they claimed was the only force capable of pacifying the country.

The army also switched sides, and fought gun battles in central Bucharest and other cities with Securitate agents, some of whom allegedly shot protesters and passers-by at random as part of a plan to sow maximum chaos and fear.

More than 1,000 people were killed before order was restored, and power was left in the hands of the NSF and its leader Ion Iliescu – a former Ceausescu ally who would go on to rule a multiparty Romania for 11 of the next 15 years.

No proper inquiry into the revolution has been held, and the bloodshed and ensuing secrecy have left many Romanians feeling that what started as a proud people's uprising in Timisoara was turned into a putsch by a communist clique – that the deadliest revolution of 1989 was stolen by some of those it sought to oust.

Events in Romania left a dark stain on a momentous year, but few in the West had dared believe such change could occur without far more violence.

“Communism in Europe was brain-dead but still had huge muscles,” said Neal Ascherson, an expert on eastern Europe who reported on the revolutions.

“But the people did get it. They had lost something – not exactly their fear, but their patience,” he observed.

“Suddenly it seemed unbearable to go on accepting these systems, these portly little idiots in their blue suits, for another year, and then for another day, another hour.”

“That special sort of impatience is the power surge of revolution.”

Derek Scally

MODERN DIVISIONS

A quarter century after the Berlin Wall fell, triggering unification a year later, there have been times of late when you'd be forgiven for thinking two Germanys still exist. Not Germany east and west, but Germany inside and out.

These two Germanys don't exist on any map but inside people's minds. The first is the country as Germans see it: a prosperous place – poorer than West Germany, richer than East Germany – that scores goals and sells cars. Historical shadows are retreating in this Germany as a confident “unity” generation, born around 1989/90, discard their parents' old east-west distinctions.

But there is a second Germany: a place that exists in the minds of its European neighbours. A decade ago this Germany was hyped as the sick man of Europe. Now the media hype machine has reversed, and Germany is an all-powerful, über-efficient hegemon in Europe, looming particularly large in EU countries whose economies – and confidence – have taken a beating in recent years.

These two Germanys – the domestic one and the external one perceived by its neighbours - are part of a larger picture. Rather than viewed as complementary, these two Germanys are left to rub each other up the wrong way.

The post-crisis debate about whether the continent can expect a German Europe or a European Germany goes over the heads of most people, yet it electrifies Europe's political and media elite.

“I see in Berlin's political elite a growing confidence, a feeling of ‘we're somebodies again’, while around the EU a growing scepticism towards Germany, that Berlin has too much power,” said Prof Ingolf Pernice, a professor of European law at Berlin's Humboldt University.

The last years have seen German leaders both flattered by their new prominence in Europe and put upon by the resulting expectations. They feel confident about Germany's strength in Europe's present yet vulnerable about its future weak spots: a ticking demographic timebomb, industrial-based prosperity based on an uncertain transition to renewable energy and an overstretched infrastructure in western Germany.

These confident-yet-vulnerable Germans see red when confronted with others' ideas that Berlin can and should bankroll solutions to Europe's financial problems.

During the crisis, German chancellor Angela Merkel adopted a strategy of plausible deniability: politically ambiguous signals that unsettled EU partners just enough to agree reforms to sell back home to secure backing for unpalatable bailouts. With this dual strategy, Dr Merkel avoided being taken fiscal hostage by her EU partners, kept her voters on board,

calmed financial markets inflated expectations of what Germany could afford to do and, despite her critics claims of “too little too late”, helped to ensure the euro’s survival.

But what is her plan beyond the euro crisis? Even Dr Merkel’s admirers suggest her recent ambiguity strategy may have worked too well.

Peter Sutherland, chairman of Goldman Sachs International and a former European Commissioner, says her failure to deliver a Draghi-style “whatever it takes” speech to stabilise the euro was a smart political tactic but a strategic problem for Europe. “Where Merkel has failed,” he said, “is not being generous enough in communicating terms of financial support that would mitigate some of the negative feeling.”

Not explaining Berlin’s thinking in the euro crisis for strategic reasons has allowed doubt to creep into Germany’s perceived European commitment around the continent and at home.

A mood of prosperity chauvinism towards Germany’s neighbours has taken root and a small but loud minority in the Alternative für Deutschland party are challenging Germany’s traditional pro-European vocation.

The challenge for Dr Merkel is to get beyond her euro crisis strategy – balancing EU partners’ demands with begrudging elites at home – to come up with a new chapter. Euro crisis rows have left their mark and an economic standoff between Germany and its neighbours over whether Berlin’s demands were a success or failure.

Beyond the ongoing economic debate over austerity, the standoff is one of leadership. Berlin, some European critics say, is suffering from Garbo syndrome: it wants to be left alone rather than lead. Put these arguments to senior German officials, however, and they turn them on their head. Calls for greater German leadership from its partners, they claim, are actually demands for Germany to do as it’s told, particularly on economic matters. The frustration stems less from a German failure to lead, they say, but others’ disinterest in following.

“Germany has been urged to take on a leadership role and when it does, it is criticised for the positions it takes,” says Prof Pernice. “The problem for Germany is its tendency for overdoing things, for playing the schoolmaster, and often a lack of tact and understatement.”

Amid this friction German historians are debating whether we are witnessing a new iteration of the old Bismarckian dilemma of Germany: too big for Europe and too small for the world.

Most ordinary Germans don’t view their country as a hegemon, says German historian Prof Sönke Neitzel, while an elite that might harbour such notions are hobbled by a lack of intellectual and institutional skill. “Germany has achieved its post-war aim of living in a united Europe in security and peace,” said Prof Neitzel, a historian at the London School of Economics (LSE).

“I don’t think Germany ever strove to be a big power again but here we are. Yet just because Germany is now economically strong, there is a false assumption elsewhere that Berlin has a cunning master plan. It doesn’t.”

When pressed, senior government officials in Berlin concede this point. Merkel-era Germany is very precise on what it wants and expects of its European partners, particularly after the euro crisis, but vague on what it wants and expects of itself. “This is the price we pay for the Merkel method of small steps: she refuses to define anything for fear of being measured up to it later,” says a very senior German official in Berlin. “We cannot explain to people Germany’s wider interests and priorities – for itself or for Europe – because the chancellery refuses to define them for us.”

While Dr Merkel hesitates, another former East German is nudging things on: incumbent German president Joachim Gauck. A former pastor and a player in the events of 1989, he has used a series of his speeches this year to challenge Germans into defining the country beyond negative terms – as a country that is not a dictatorship, as not ready to accept military action for stability purposes.

Faced with new global terror threats, Mr Gauck argues, the people who toppled the Berlin Wall must redefine their interests and use their regained sovereignty as a constructive force in the world. “We do not want others to decide how we live but decide for ourselves,” said Mr Gauck last month in Leipzig. “We need to think anew about what responsibility Germany is willing to take on for our world, along with its friends and partners.”

Ask long-time Berlin watchers about Germany’s looming challenges and two are mentioned regularly. First: how will Berlin respond to an economic slowdown at home, given the tight fiscal corset it fashioned for the euro zone during the recent crisis? Second: how will Germany react if – or, as many leading officials concede, when – it is finally targeted in a major terrorist attack? After 25 years knitting together east and west, these two challenges could resolve the tension caused by the country’s new division: Germany’s expectations of itself and those of its partners.

FROM A DISTANCE

Fritz Stern has been an essential voice in German life for decades, though he fled the country as a 12-year-old boy. The historian, essayist and author was born in 1926 in Breslau, then in Germany, to a prominent doctor and researcher father, Rudolf Stern, and an educational reformer mother, Käthe Brieger Stern.

Stern's grandparents converted from Judaism to Christianity at the end of the 19th century but they left the increasingly oppressive Nazi Germany a month before Kristallnacht in 1938, settling in New York. Stern attended Columbia University, where he later worked as a professor from 1953 to 1997.

Still a prolific historian and commentator aged 88, Stern was lauded for his 2006 book *Five Germanys I Have Known*, which analysed from a distance his shape-shifting homeland – from the Weimar Republic and fascism to division, unification and beyond.

The book is regularly cited by Germans as one of the best written about their country and, in her 2009 speech to the US congress, Chancellor Angela Merkel expressed her “great joy and deep gratitude” that Stern was in the audience.

With its rigorous analysis and personal insights, *Five Germanys I Have Known* is particularly insightful given his year in Bonn in 1993 as special adviser to Richard Holbrooke, then US ambassador to Germany.

After a lifetime examining how Germany shifted from radical illiberalism to Nazism, Stern is wary of applying retroactive interpretations to historical events.

In a 1987, for instance, he attracted acclaim and controversy for a Bundestag speech marking the 1953 workers' revolt in East Germany. Put down by Soviet tanks with about 100 dead, the uprising was not, Stern insisted, a protest for German unification – a common West German view – but a demand by East German workers for reform.

Today he is wary of attempts to shoehorn the events of 1989 into the frame of unification, which came later. His concern is mirrored with this year's push in Germany to see things the other way around: the fall of the Berlin Wall and unification a year later as the consequence of earlier events.

Two key events, Stern argues, are the march in Leipzig on October 9th, 1989, when about 90,000 people demanded a reformed East Germany; and the demonstration by 500,000 people on East Berlin's Alexanderplatz on November 4th, which echoed the demand.

“These events were a passionate demand for a responsible, legitimate, democratic regime of openness,” he says.

“People have to remember what actually happened at the time and not twist things into a convenient narrative based on what came later, which is more easily palatable.”

This debate is once again live thanks to ex-chancellor Helmut Kohl. In remarks from 2001, published by Der Spiegel last month, he said it was wrong to suggest the “holy spirit somehow came over the squares of Leipzig and changed the world” in 1989.

Instead, he told a ghost-writer, the Iron Curtain fell because the Soviet bloc was bankrupt, leaving reform the only option for leader Mikhail Gorbachev.

Stern is unimpressed by Kohl’s logic, that the Berlin Wall was felled by economics and not by people power. “I think that is more an indictment of Mr Kohl than a useful remark about 1989,” he says. “The people went on to the streets not because of economics but because they were disgusted with a Stasi kind of life.”

Gorbachev was, in Stern’s view, “one of the most extraordinary men of the 20th century, a superb realist, a man of an open mind and a sense of history and perhaps one who surpasses Dr Kohl”.

If anything, Kohl’s remarks in Der Spiegel underline Stern’s concern in the early 1990s that West Germans had not treated East Germans with enough generosity and understanding.

“The East Germans paid more for the second World War than West Germany, they also went out on the street in 1989, risking everything for reform,” he says.

“I don’t think Kohl fully recognised the significance of how members of the East German population risked a great deal to demand a respectable, decent and honourable civic life.”

Despite his criticisms of Kohl, Stern believes the ex-chancellor acted correctly in seizing the moment for unification offered in November 1989. But the historian still wishes the process had proceeded more slowly to allow East Germans a greater chance to contribute. These shortcomings aside, Stern is impressed by how smoothly the process has unfolded.

A quarter of a century on, he says Germany’s next challenge is how to meet its partners’ expectations to be an active player in European and world affairs. It has in Merkel a canny political leader well up to the task, he believes: firm and non-demonstrative in dealings with Russia on Ukraine, yet restrained enough to navigate the tortuous German debate on its engagement with world crises.

Stern’s main concern today is that the frequency with which Berlin comes down in favour of inaction may not always be an honourable abstention but an evasion of its new European responsibilities.

In this he echoes foreign minister Frank Walter Steinmeier, who told Munich’s security conference in February that Germany’s culture of military restraint should not be “misunderstood as a principle of keeping out”.

“We have always wanted is a peaceful Germany, but it has turned into a pacifist Germany,” says Stern. “There is a difference between the two and I’m afraid that an ‘ohne mich’ (‘without me’) mentality may be growing.”

As for the tensions facing Germany during the euro crisis, Stern suggests these were motivated less by prejudices of the past than by anger at Berlin's current austerity policies.

Striking a new balance with France and Italy is Germany's new challenge, relieving social misery around the continent without driving inflation, he says.

"Germany can move by example and by suggestion, but has to be very careful," he says, citing ongoing problems and imbalances as a result of the stalled Franco-German motor.

For Stern, Merkel's firm political stance and lack of political arrogance means that, despite the talk, the EU is not dominated by a hegemonic Germany – which would be the sixth iteration of the country in his lifetime.

"I think we are still dealing with the fifth Germany, a change in that will come only if something drastic happened to the EU," he says.

Twenty-five years after a wall fell and a new Germany emerged, Stern remains cautiously optimistic that Berlin will, with its European neighbours, continue to "muddle through".

"This is not a German trait, nor is it something Germans condone or like," he says. "But if we can muddle through and don't stumble into another economic crisis – which I think is possible – we will perhaps sort things out."

Taking stock of Germany after 1989, the 88-year-old historian says it's important to remember what went right: a united Germany achieved without bloodshed that, after centuries of strife, now lives at peace with its neighbours. The native of Breslau, now Wroclaw in Poland, singles out thriving German-Polish relations as a huge achievement of the last years, "something to be cherished".

And, despite dire warnings of some political leaders in 1989, he sees in Berlin a level of political responsibility unthinkable in previous Germanys.

"No nation is immune to reckless policies," he says. "But I cannot think of a single instance in Germany in the last 10-15 years."

Derek Scally

GERMANY'S SHIFTING MEMORY MINEFIELD

For anyone who didn't experience East Germany first hand, an irresistible place to start is the former headquarters of the Stasi, the feared secret police, in eastern Berlin.

The grey facade is as forbidding and the strip-lighting as harsh as ever. In the corner of a hallway the wood-effect, veneered cabins of the paternoster lift squeak past – one up, one down – in an endless hopeless loop. Kafka would feel right at home here.

For two decades this Stasi building has been an unholy place of pilgrimage for millions of people, while its poisonous associations dominated debate about the vanished East Germany's legacy. And with good reason: the euphoria of toppling the Berlin Wall in November 1989 soon gave way to horror at the discovery of the full extent of the Stasi's operating methods, in particular a dense surveillance network with one official employee or unofficial informer for every 65 citizens.

The Stasi became a synonym, even a brand, for the insidious paranoia of the East German regime, typified by an old sign still hanging on the wall: "We must know everything." But the irresistible magnetism of the Stasi story has also created a distortion field around the way East Germany is remembered.

For Roland Jahn, this is a dilemma. Three years ago the 61-year-old former East German dissident and campaigning journalist became the third custodian of the Stasi files, all 887 million pages of them, which were opened to German citizens in 1992. The momentous decision to make them accessible was far from a given at the time, but Mr Jahn says it was a crucial element in dealing with the past.

"Open files are not there to open old wounds but to allow old wounds to heal," he says.

Still, like many former East Germans, he worries that the Stasi Records Agency has become a victim of its own success, and that the Stasi is the default lens through which all life in the East German state is now viewed.

"Everyday life in East Germany did not always inevitably involve the Stasi, and there are times I wish we had a little more talk of other aspects, like the ruling SED party," says Jahn.

"There were people who had an okay life in East Germany, and those who felt it was a prison. Our challenge is to see this as a whole."

This is the new challenge of German unification, after a quarter-century rescuing East German infrastructure and buildings from decades of neglect. The 25th anniversary has crept up on Germans, revealing just how much internal reconstruction has to be done on what is remembered about East Germany and why.

In his book-filled office in a former East Berlin brewery, the journalist-turned-publisher Christoph Links counts on his fingers the three periods to date in the public debate.

Immediately after 1989, he says, the shock over the Stasi revelations forced an onerous but necessary examination of state repression. He believes that this handed a welcome stick for West Germans to beat the east and its citizens.

This first phase triggered a backlash from around 1999, involving a wave of eastern nostalgia dubbed “Ostalgia”. In this period, many ex-easterners embraced any cult objects, or films such as *Good Bye, Lenin!* (2003), that restored some legitimacy and dignity to their memories of their past.

After these two extremes, Links believes the pendulum has come to rest in a calmer, more differentiated middle ground.

“Many western Germans now realise it was possible for East Germans to respect certain aspects of their country and criticise others,” he said. “There were hardliners and liberals in East Germany, progressive periods and phases of real dictatorship. Today the 17 million former East Germans no longer feel they have to justify to West Germans why they didn’t just leave.”

The appetite for a more nuanced debate is clear in the titles recently published by Links. From urban planning to modern literature, there is a new push to view as a historical whole the previously distinct histories of West and East Germany.

Three winners of the Frankfurt Book Fair’s top prize since 2005 have been from eastern authors, writing bestselling literary explorations not of why East Germany failed but of why it kept going for so long.

For Roland Jahn, the time is finally ripe to explore the pin that held East Germany in place for four decades: conformity. In a new book on the subject, he ponders how East Germans constantly weighed up the costs and benefits of conforming against the costs and benefits of opposing the system.

“No one was just a rebel or just a conformist in East Germany,” he said. “Reflecting on life in East Germany means shining a light on the mechanisms that affected us, not judging those who conformed.”

This debate is a quantum leap after years of focus on the Stasi, the Berlin Wall and other potent symbols of German division. An excellent contribution to this fresh, differentiated debate is Berlin’s new permanent exhibition, *Everyday Life in the GDR*, at the Kulturbrauerei museum in Prenzlauer Berg. Not to be confused with the tourist-trap GDR Museum, opposite Berlin Cathedral, *Everyday Life in the GDR* uses objects to explore the complex give and take of East German life.

The socialist state involved both affordable living and everyday surveillance; guaranteed employment and collectivisation. East Germans escaped public pressure to conform by

escaping into private niches. Older eastern German visitors to the exhibition are enthusiastic about a display that finally addresses the black, white and grey of their former lives.

For 71-year-old Irene Melzer, the exhibition brings back the doublethink and doublespeak of public and private life. Further bad memories are piped through loudspeakers as an East German children's choir sings unsubtle socialist promises of a better tomorrow,

"I get the shivers when I hear those songs," says Melzer, a pastor's daughter who was refused permission to study by the atheistic authorities. For decades she was involved in church circles and determined to reform East Germany. In 1989 she "cried her eyes out" when her daughter fled west via Hungary.

After unification, Melzer opened Lutheran schools in eastern Berlin and, like 17 million other East Germans, learned how to live in an entirely new system.

"We all felt so small after 1989, that we had nothing to contribute," she says. "But over the years we've started to realise we had good things, worthwhile experiences among the terrible things."

As 1989 retreats ever deeper into history, Germany seems ready to break out of entrenched attitudes to the past. That is the aim in Berlin's Gethsemane Church, a redbrick structure in the eastern district of Prenzlauer Berg, and a focal point of 1989 citizen protest. Eye-witnesses from 25 years ago have worked with students on an evening of stories, choreography and audience questions such as: "Were you not afraid?", "Do you love orders more than people?" and "Where did you get your courage?"

The Gethsemane Church event is a welcome change from ritualised memorialising, particularly as it highlights some important facts about 1989, such as the way the vast majority of Germans, east and west, never took to the streets that autumn, leaving those who did facing a real risk of being beaten, detained or worse.

Sitting in a pew, Benita Stroner, a demonstrator here in 1989, relates how she was often followed home from the church by the Stasi, how her apartment was searched regularly, and how she later found listening devices there.

The 67-year-old has fond memories of 1989, though she remembers the atmosphere in the church, besieged by armed soldiers and police, as one of "cold, fear and uncertainty

I wasn't afraid, I'm not that type," she says. "Like the many women in the Gethsemane group – and there were really a lot of women – I just wanted a better life for my children."

Sitting on the church altar, the local teenagers discuss everything they have learned from the project, including the fact that the decisive push in 1989 came from ordinary people like their parents and grandparents.

"I didn't realise until this project how many courageous people there were back then," says Celia, 15. "And I didn't know until now that they were protesting for a better life in East Germany, not to bring down the Berlin Wall."

Derek Scally

THE GAME THAT MADE A REPUBLIC

Last July, the German weekly *Der Spiegel* printed a cover bearing the headline “Wir sind wieder . . . wer?” This headline was a play on words based on a saying that became popular about 10 years after the end of the second World War. “Wir sind wieder wer” means “we’re somebody again,” and *Spiegel*’s tweak was asking, literally: “we are again . . . who?”

The title article was a rumination on what the national team’s victory in the World Cup said about Germany in 2014. But the headline was a reminder that nothing the German team ever does can equal the impact of its first and greatest World Cup win, when they went as underdogs to the 1954 final in Bern and beat Hungary – then considered the team of the century – by three goals to two. Football is never truly important, but the Miracle of Bern is probably as close as it gets.

West Germany had been outsiders in every sense. In their second group match they had been thrashed 8-3 by Hungary. “Nobody believed in us. We were at rock bottom, politically, economically and in terms of sport,” the midfielder Horst Eckel told *Stern* on the 50th anniversary of the match.

Undaunted, the West Germans beat Turkey, Yugoslavia and Austria to earn a rematch against the Hungarians in the final. After eight minutes, Hungary led 2-0. Ten minutes later West Germany had fought back to 2-2. With six minutes remaining, the ball broke to Helmut Rahn on the edge of the box and his left-footed shot flew past the Hungarian goalkeeper, Gyula Grosics, into the bottom corner.

Most Germans experienced the moment via the medium of Herbert Zimmermann’s radio commentary. His ragged screeches were to become one of the most famous broadcasts in German history. “Tor! Tor! Tor! Tor! Tor für Deutschland! Drei zu zwei führt Deutschland. Halten Sie mich für verrückt, halten Sie mich für übergeshnapppt!” (“Goal, goal, goal, goal! Goal for Germany! Germany leads 3-2! Call me mad, call me crazy!”)

Zimmermann’s reaction at the final whistle also became immortal: “Aus, aus, aus, aus! Der Spiel ist aus! Deutschland ist Weltmeister!” (“Over, over, over, over! The game is over! Germany is world champion!”)

You notice that Zimmermann is calling the team Germany, not West Germany, which was a concept Germans were just getting used to. The Federal Republic was then only five years old and nobody could be sure it would be there much longer. Neither of the two previous German states had lasted as long as 15 years.

The ultimate success of the West German state obviously owed more to the Marshall Plan than to Rahn’s winner in Bern, but the impact of winning the World Cup on the national mood was profound. It was, as the Franco-German politician Daniel Cohn-Bendit would later

point out, “the first time the Germans were recognised in the world for a non-aggressive achievement”.

Conservative German historian Joachim Fest was 27 in 1954. He would write that West Germany had three founding fathers: in the political sphere, the chancellor Konrad Adenauer; in the business sphere, the economy minister Ludwig Erhard; and in the spiritual sphere, the 1954 football captain Fritz Walter. Fest said that the day Fritz Walter lifted the World Cup was “in a certain way the birth of the Federal Republic”.

As spontaneous mass celebrations swept occupied Germany and jubilant crowds greeted the returning players, foreigners watched with a mixture of irritation and unease. Did this eruption of long-suppressed emotions herald the reawakening of aggressive German nationalism? It had not escaped the notice of the watching world that when the German anthem was played in the stadium in Bern to honour the victory, the German crowd sang along using the taboo words of the first verse, “Deutschland, Deutschland über alles”, rather than the officially sanctioned third verse.

Two days later, the president of the German FA, Peco Bauwens, gave a speech to a victory gathering in a Munich beer hall. Nobody knows how many beers Bauwens had before he spoke. And it’s hard to say how much of the speech went out live on Bavarian radio before the signal was cut, because the tapes have been lost. But the next day’s newspapers reported that, after some remarks about how Germans must no longer tolerate being told they could not honour their flag as other nations did, Bauwens criticised the envious Romance nations; invoked Wotan, ruler of the Norse gods; and suggested that Herberger’s team was a fine example of the potential of the Führer principle in action.

Bauwens’s gaffe was good news at least for an East German establishment that had until then been at a loss to know what to say about a capitalist triumph they had never seen coming. The official stance in East Berlin was to favour their fellow communists from Hungary, but naturally that position was at odds with what was felt by pretty much the entire population. The East German administration felt more comfortable after Bauwens’s exuberance had exposed western crypto-fascism.

If the German success seemed to announce the rise of the Federal Republic, the Hungarian defeat was a portent of the disasters to come in that country. The striker Ferenc Puskas said that when he returned to Budapest, people looked at him as though he had a disease. The goalkeeper Grocsis was considered to have been at fault for Rahn’s goal. He remembered that the team was met by party general secretary Mátyás Rákosi, who assured them that “none of you should feel afraid of being punished for this game”.

Grocsis suspected otherwise. After an abortive attempt to defect during the Hungarian revolution in 1956, he was forced to sign for the tiny Tatabánya club and remain there in ignominy for the rest of his career.

Fifty years after the win, the schmaltzy drama *Das Wunder von Bern* (The Miracle of Bern) was a smash hit at the German box office. The film told the story of the reconciliation

between a young boy and his emotionally distant father, who has just returned from 10 years in a Soviet POW camp, against the backdrop of the World Cup win.

In the half-century between the Miracle and the movie, certain allegations had been thrown around. The Hungarians always believed that the West Germans had targeted Puskas with heavy fouls in the first match between the sides, deliberately injuring his ankle so as to impair his effectiveness in a potential final. There had also been persistent rumours that the West Germans had been injected with stimulants in the dressing room before the final. While it seems they were injected with something – and with a dirty needle to boot, because several of them developed hepatitis after the tournament – there is no hard evidence to suggest the injections contained anything stronger than vitamin C.

The movie ignores all that, preferring to focus on the gnomic sayings of Herberger, the innovative studs provided to the German team by Adidas and the inspirational effect that looking into the crowd and seeing his kid friend's face has on Helmut Rahn immediately before he scores the winning goal. *Das Wunder von Bern* shows us the version of 1954 that has been enshrined in German national myth.

An earlier German movie casts the Miracle in a subtly different light. The director Rainer Werner Fassbinder was part of the generation that was born immediately after the war. By the 1960s they were questioning whether their parents and grandparents truly had come to terms with the recent past, or whether they had simply forgotten it for the sake of convenience. Had the Federal Republic not simply rechannelled the nationalistic energy of the old Germany towards economic goals? If the slogan of 1954 was “we’re somebody again”, Fassbinder wondered who, exactly, “we” were supposed to be.

His 1978 film *The Marriage of Maria Braun* allegorises the early years of the West German state in the story of Maria, who begins the movie as one of the millions of Trümmerfrauen – rubble women – who led the reconstruction of a society that had lost so many of its young men. Several key scenes are played out to the sound of historic radio broadcasts. We hear Konrad Adenauer promising that he will not rearm West Germany and, later, announcing rearmament. The beautiful, ambitious Maria is not taking much notice. She is a cool materialist who says things like “books burn too fast, and they don’t give any heat”, and she’s preoccupied with getting ahead. She manipulates a succession of men and becomes rich, cynical and rather cruel: “It’s a bad time for feelings, I believe, but that suits me. It means nothing really affects me.”

In the final scene, it’s difficult to hear what Maria and her husband, Hermann, are saying to each other, because the radio is turned up so loud. We can hear Zimmermann calling the closing stages of the 1954 World Cup final while Maria and Hermann discuss the terms of a will. They are both now wildly rich, though the precise details of how the inheritance happened are a reversal for Maria. The scene and the commentary continue for several minutes until Maria lights a cigarette, not realising she’s left the gas on in her expensive new kitchen. She and Hermann die in the explosion as Zimmermann ecstatically hails Germany as the world champions: “Aus! Aus! Der Spiel ist aus!”

The movie had begun with a portrait of Hitler on screen, now it ends with portraits of West German chancellors: Adenauer, Erhard, Kiesinger, Schmidt. Things might have changed, but not as much as you think.

Ken Early