

1

The new Germany eight years on

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'*Bonn ist nicht Weimar*' This oft-quoted remark from the mid-1950s¹ was meant to indicate that the political system in West Germany, with Bonn as its (provisional) capital after 1949, was different from that of the ill-fated Weimar Republic (1919–33), Germany's first attempt at democracy. Experts in German politics² point out that the Berlin Republic, by which they mean the new Federal Republic of Germany, which has existed since the day of German Unity on 3 October 1990, is also different from the Bonn Republic. It has also been emphasised that Bonn was not built in a day. Neither was Berlin. The new Germany, with Berlin as its capital, was able to make good progress in a relatively short time—although not all its citizens might agree—but it will take many more years yet before the 'merger' of the two Germanys is complete.

Following the 1994 federal elections, the eminent Franco-German political scientist Alfred Grosser commented: 'das Ergebnis zeigt, daß die deutsche Einheit noch nicht vollendet ist' (the result shows that German Unity is not yet complete) (*Focus Wahlspezial* 1994: 19). That was a reference to, amongst other things, the very different voting patterns and political cultures between East and West (see [Chapter 4](#)). So, despite the numerous changes of the last seven or eight years, which many Germans and outside observers would, on balance, probably view as predominantly positive achievements, two things are quite clear: first, the unification process is still by no means over and, second, Unification brought not only pluses—there were minuses too.

When the former German Democratic Republic, the GDR³ (die Deutsche Demokratische Republik, die DDR)—often referred to simply as East Germany—joined the former Federal Republic of Germany, the FRG, (die Bundesrepublik Deutschland, die BRD)—often referred to simply as West Germany—in the autumn of 1990, the new Germany, retaining the name FRG, was born. It consists of sixteen federal states or *Länder*: the ten so-called 'old' western states, the five 'new' eastern states, plus the new capital, a reunited Berlin (see [Figure 1.1](#)). Berlin is both a city and, with its surrounding area, a federal state known in German as a *Stadtstaat*, a city-state.



Figure 1.1 The Länder

Federal Republic of Germany	
Capital:	Berlin
Area:	356,854 sq km
Population:	81.3 million

Schleswig-Holstein	
Capital:	Kiel
Area:	15,731 sq km
Population:	2.7 million

Bremen	
Capital:	Bremen
Area:	404 sq km
Population:	0.68 million

Lower Saxony	
Capital:	Hanover
Area:	47,351 sq km
Population:	7.6 million

North Rhine-Westphalia	
Capital:	Düsseldorf
Area:	34,070 sq km
Population:	17.7 million

Hesse	
Capital:	Wiesbaden
Area:	21,114 sq km
Population:	5.9 million

Rhineland-Palatinate	
Capital:	Mainz
Area:	19,849 sq km
Population:	3.9 million

Saarland	
Capital:	Saarbrücken
Area:	2,570 sq km
Population:	1.1 million

Baden-Württemberg	
Capital:	Stuttgart
Area:	35,751 sq km
Population:	10.2 million

Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania	
Capital:	Schwerin
Area:	23,559 sq km
Population:	1.9 million

Hamburg	
Capital:	Hamburg
Area:	755 sq km
Population:	1.7 million

Brandenburg	
Capital:	Potsdam
Area:	29,056 sq km
Population:	2.6 million

Berlin	
Capital:	Berlin
Area:	889 sq km
Population:	3.4 million

Saxony-Anhalt	
Capital:	Magdeburg
Area:	20,607 sq km
Population:	2.9 million

Saxony	
Capital:	Dresden
Area:	18,341 sq km
Population:	4.6 million

Thuringia	
Capital:	Erfurt
Area:	16,251 sq km
Population:	2.6 million

Bavaria	
Capital:	Munich
Area:	70,554 sq km
Population:	11.8 million

The new Germany ought to have been in an ideal position to understand the problems of both Western democracies and the countries of a changing Eastern Europe, following the breakdown of a number of socialist/communist systems. However, in the heady and euphoric days following the fall of the Berlin Wall and the opening of the East Berlin and East German borders, German politicians seemed to be obsessed with the political and economic problems, as they saw them, ignoring almost completely the social, cultural and psychological ones which have since reared their heads in no uncertain terms.

Nevertheless it must be acknowledged that the truly astonishing events of 1989/90, which even at the beginning of 1989 could not have been predicted, brought about the most exciting and far-reaching changes in life and society in Germany since 1945. This book sets out to highlight and explain several key aspects of political, economic, social and cultural life in contemporary Germany.

GERMANY'S NEW ROLE BRINGS NEW PROBLEMS

The first five-year census for the whole of the new Germany, the results of which were published in September 1996, revealed that between 1990 and 1995 the population increased by 1.7 million to a total of 81.6 million. That made Germany, after Russia, the country with the largest population in Europe, even though France and Spain are larger in terms of territory. Germany has borders with nine countries, including the Czech Republic and Poland in the East. It occupies a strategically important geopolitical position in the very heart of Europe; as such, the new, united Germany is ideally situated to influence policy decisions and play a vital role on the ever-changing European stage, as well as to act as an essential link between East and West in both a European and a global context.

In the intervening years since the historic events of 1989 and 1990 many Germans (51 per cent in one survey) spoke, and still speak, of the wall in people's heads (*die Mauer in den Köpfen*). This expression implies that, after living for more than forty years in two diametrically opposed systems, many Germans from the East ('Ossis') and from the West ('Wessis')—according to various surveys reported by the German news magazine *Der Spiegel*—still feel separated from one other in the new Germany: unified but not united.

In the mid-1990s a report by the respected public opinion researcher Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, of the Allensbach Institute, asked Germans in the West and the East to compare their economic situation in 1995 with that before Unification. Only 6 per cent of those in the West said they were better off, whilst 32 per cent said they were worse off. In the East, however, 58 per cent reported that they were better off, whilst only 15

per cent thought they were worse off.⁴ So a stark difference in perception of the effects of German unity in the old and new federal states is evident, and not just from the results of such polls.

In 1990, 47 per cent of East Germans (in the new states) had said in a survey that freedom (*Freiheit*) was more important than equality (*Gleichheit*). By 1996 only 35 per cent wanted freedom, whilst 47 per cent maintained that equality was more important (Allensbach survey, reported on in *Der Spiegel* in November 1996). This demand for equality applied to wages too. Although prices and rents were always much lower in the former GDR, so too were wages. In the initial years after Unification people used to ask why, for example, bus drivers in east Berlin earned considerably less than those in the western half of the city. Towards the end of 1996 a new minimum hourly wage on German building sites was introduced. Although the rates of pay for the old and the new *Länder* are now much closer, even in 1996 the rate was DM 17 in the West, but only DM 15.64 in the East (*Report* from the Federal Embassy of the FRG).

Over three-quarters of Germans in the East supported the call for more equality and fewer social differences (*Mehr Gleichheit, weniger soziale Unterschiede*). Obviously far more changed in the East than in the West, where some cynically claimed that originally only the post codes had changed—another reference to the fact that many citizens in the eastern states felt they had been taken over by the western states. In the survey someone from Halle (in the East) was quoted as saying that the citizens of the new states were ‘the conquered new underclass’ (*die besiegten neuen Untertanen*).

Clearly, the momentous events beginning on 9 November 1989 with the collapse of the Berlin Wall (built on 13 August 1961) and the fall of the regime in the GDR, accompanied by the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe, had tremendous implications for Germany’s new role, both as a European and a world power. For the first time since Germany was originally unified in 1871, the current borders have been accepted. At most other times in Germany’s eventful history its borders have been the subject of dispute and lively debate. In this sense it can be said that the new Germany is the ‘first non-revisionist state since 1871’ (Smith *et al.* 1996:10). It could be argued that over the past century Great Britain, France and Germany have been the most powerful states in Europe. Yet Britain and France developed as nation-states much earlier than Germany, whose political history has been one of fragmentation and discontinuity (Paterson and Southern 1991:1).

Amongst the many changes brought by Unification, one highly significant shift of emphasis was achieved simply by taking the decision to return to Berlin as the capital of a united Germany, and later deciding, albeit again by a narrow margin, to adopt the city as the seat of

government for both houses of parliament, starting early in the twenty-first century. The geographical and psychological importance of moving from Bonn, situated only 60 kilometres (40 miles) from the Belgian border, to Berlin, about the same distance from the Polish border, was clear for all to see. The strategic significance of the geopolitical position of a united Germany at the centre of Europe, linking East and West, is equally clear.

THE ROAD TO UNITY

The so-called 'peaceful revolution' began on 2 May 1989, when the Hungarian authorities started to dismantle the barbed wire on their border fences. Five days later there were widespread protests in the GDR at the manipulation of local election results. In Leipzig over one hundred demonstrators were arrested by the feared and resented East German state security police—the Stasi (der Staatssicherheitsdienst— die Stasi). On 5 June the main newspaper of the ruling party in the GDR, the *Neues Deutschland*, justified the bloody treatment of the demonstrators in Beijing as 'the reply to the counter-revolutionary rebellion of an extremist minority'.

In August 1989 hundreds of East Germans fled to the West German embassies in East Berlin, Budapest and Prague. The number wishing to leave the GDR was estimated at around 1 million. A crucial turning-point came when Hungary fully opened its borders with Austria on 11 September, allowing East Germans already in Hungary to travel to the West, via Austria (at that time East Germans were of course allowed to travel only to countries in the Eastern bloc). On 25 September at a peaceful demonstration after Monday prayers for peace in Leipzig—the phrase 'Monday demonstrations' (*die Montagsdemonstrationen*) was coined when these gatherings became a regular weekly event—some 6,000 people demanded freedom of expression, assembly and travel.

On 7 October, Mikhail Gorbachev, attending the GDR's fortieth-anniversary celebrations, warned that anyone who 'missed the boat' would pay the price (his words were translated into German as 'wer zu spät kommt, den bestraft das Leben'). On 9 October the first mass demonstration of some 70,000 people took to the streets of Leipzig chanting the slogan that soon entered the history books: 'Wir sind das Volk' (we are the people). Nine days later the GDR state and party leader Erich Honecker was forced to resign. Egon Krenz took over as the new leader of what was the main political party in East Germany, the Socialist Unity Party, the SED (die Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands).

After more than 1 million people had joined a demonstration on the streets of East Berlin on 4 November demanding reforms, similar protests against SED policies in all the major East German cities followed.

Thousands continued to leave the GDR every day, heading for Hungary via Poland or Czechoslovakia. A key date which has now entered the history books was 9 November 1989, when cabinet member Günter Schabowski announced, amidst some confusion, immediate freedom of travel for East German citizens. The Berlin Wall was opened amongst amazing scenes of euphoria and mass hysteria, as a multitude of East Germans poured into the West. Three days later the queues of mainly tiny East German *Trabis* (Trabant cars) stretched back 65 kilometres (over 40 miles) from Helmstedt, one of the border crossing points.

On 22 November, at one of the regular Leipzig Monday demonstrations, the crowd chanted the adapted slogan 'Wir sind *ein Volk*' (we are *one* people). Rather cynically, some Germans from the West were later heard to reply, 'Yes, so are we' (we are also one people, and we want to stay that way—'wir sind auch ein Volk'), although it would be incorrect to assume that was the majority view. Helmut Kohl put forward a ten-point plan with the aim of, but no specific timetable for, unification of the two Germanys. In early December the Round Table (*der Runde Tisch*), based on the Hungarian and Polish models, brought together for the first time representatives from the SED, the churches, opposition groups, new democratic movements and the old *bloc* parties and mass organisations.

Kohl visited Dresden on 19 December, where demonstrators were demanding German unification; three days after that the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin was opened. On Christmas Eve 1989, West Germans were permitted to enter the GDR without a visa or the usual compulsory exchange of currency—*Zwangsumtausch (von Devisen)*. The latter had been a source of great annoyance to West Germans for many years, since they, and other visitors to the GDR, had always been forced to change set amounts of foreign currency per day in return for the virtually worthless East German *Ostmark*. Pre-1990 the East German authorities were especially keen to get West marks (DM) or US dollars, and even the ailing UK pound!

In January 1990 people power was again on the march in various East German cities as something approaching 200,000 demonstrators called for the reunification of the two German states (*die Wiedervereinigung beider deutschen Staaten*) and the exclusion of the SED. Demonstrators also occupied the Stasi headquarters in Berlin. The Round Table agreed on free elections in the GDR for 18 March 1990 (earlier than originally envisaged). At the beginning of February, Chancellor Kohl presented proposals for German Economic and Monetary Union (GEMU) to his cabinet in Bonn; on 12 February the so-called 'two-plus-four' talks between the two German states and the four victorious allies were agreed upon. Strange though it may seem, the original four powers which occupied Germany after the Second World War—the USA, Great Britain,

France and the USSR —were also consulted, since Germany never had a peace treaty.

The first free elections in the GDR were then held on 18 March 1990. The Alliance for Germany, i.e. the CDU, the right-of-centre Conservatives, plus two smaller partners, gained 48.1 per cent of the vote. The SPD, the left-of-centre Social Democrats, who were then, and still are, the main opposition party in Bonn, polled 21.8 per cent; and the Party of Democratic Socialism, the PDS (Partei der demokratischen Sozialismus), the successor to the East German SED, gained 16.3 per cent. By mid-February 1990 the membership of the PDS was about 700,000. Its predecessor in the GDR, the SED, the ruling Socialist Unity Party, had boasted 2.3 million members only one year earlier. On 12 April the first freely elected government in the GDR was sworn in. The new minister president, Lothar de Maiziere, headed a Grand Coalition consisting of the two major parties, the CDU and the SPD, together with the Liberals, plus two smaller parties from the East.

Although the SPD in the West, and their leader Oskar Lafontaine, were in favour of all-German elections first and Unification second, in the event the view of Helmut Kohl and his party, the CDU, prevailed. German Unification took place on 3 October 1990, and the first all-German elections for fifty-eight years were held on 2 December 1990.

THE GERMAN PEOPLE: THE SEARCH FOR IDENTITY

One of the key points to emphasise about the German people is the tremendous variety and disparate nature of the characteristics displayed by the many different traditions and regions they represent. It has taken well over a thousand years for the German people to develop from various ethnic groupings and tribes, e.g. Swabians, Bavarians, Franks, Saxons, Celts and a range of Germanic groups.

The Germans have always had difficulty with concepts such as *Nation* and *Volk*. Nationhood and the German identity have never been as clearly defined as in some other countries. Germany was a late developer as a nation-state. August Heinrich Hoffmann—he added *von* and the town where he was born, calling himself Hoffmann von Fallersleben—wrote a poem in 1841 which was set to music by Joseph Haydn. In 1922 it was adopted as the German national anthem. The opening lines of the first stanza were intended at the time to convey that the idea of creating a country called Germany was, above all, the key concept ('Deutschland, Deutschland über alles, Über alles in der Welt'). In the middle of the nineteenth century many Germans desperately wanted to establish a nation-state as their top priority.

The poem was written at a time when there were thirty-nine sovereign German states, thirty years before Germany existed. When it first appeared, the *Deutschlandlied*, as it is now known, was simply a call for a German nation and had none of the negative connotations later associated with Hitler and the National Socialists, who used only the first verse as Germany's national anthem. Ever since 1952, when it was adopted as the Federal Republic's national anthem, only the third verse, praising unity, justice and freedom ('Einigkeit und Recht und Freiheit'), has been used. That remains the case today.

Although the Holy Roman Empire (das Heilige Römische Reich deutscher Nation) from 768 onwards brought a certain amount of national feeling (*Nationalgefühl*), the concepts of nationalism and patriotism have always been difficult ones for the Germans. It has proved to be almost impossible to define precisely what constitutes the German identity. The vagaries of German history and Germany's changing geography have meant that it constitutes a special case in terms of nationhood and citizenship. Whereas in the United States or Great Britain nationality is determined by the place of birth (*ius soli*), the German nationality law of 1913, still valid, stipulates that nationality is determined by descent (*ius sanguinis*).

Germany's external borders have changed frequently, and there are very strong regional ties amongst its people. Even today some Germans feel they are first and foremost from a particular region or locality, be it Hesse, the Rhineland, Brandenburg or wherever. Just to take one example as an illustration of the point, many North American or British visitors have heard that the Bavarians are different from other Germans, but without realising that there are in fact seven different districts, each with its own traditions, within present-day Bavaria. The districts cover three distinct regions and dialects—Bavarian, Franconian and Swabian—plus a strong contingent of Sudeten Germans from the former Czechoslovakia, and Silesians too. Since Bavaria has existed since the sixth century (long before Germany), the Bavarians are extremely proud of their unique history, special customs and enduring traditions. Indeed, parts of present-day Bavaria are two thousand years old. So, given that there are substantial differences even within one federal state, and that you cannot generalise about 'the Bavarians', then the same must apply to 'the Germans'.

It would therefore be dangerous to try to describe in too much detail 'the German people', given that it is not only the Bavarians who are different. There are fifteen other federal states, not to mention the districts within those states. The local traditions, customs and regional idiosyncrasies in other areas of Germany, such as Hamburg, the Palatinate, Friesland, Saxony or Swabia, are just as colourful and

fascinating, and the local dialects are certainly just as hard for the outsider to understand!

Partly as a result of the decentralised federal system operating in Germany today, which means that power is not all concentrated in one capital, as happens in London or Paris, the German regions and *Land* capitals have taken on considerable importance. This again strengthens the role of the federal states in the German way of life, since the *Land* has autonomy in four key areas: education, broadcasting/culture, health and police. This, in turn, means that many Germans feel a strong attachment to their particular *Land*, especially if they live in a rural setting, where regional differences tend to be more pronounced than in big cities.

The majority of Germany's population live in small towns and villages, with around one-third living in one of the eighty-four cities with more than 100,000 inhabitants, defined in German as *Gro städte* (*Facts About Germany* 1995:66). Berlin (3.5 million), Hamburg (1.7 million) and Munich (1.3 million) are the largest cities, followed by Cologne, Frankfurt, Essen, Dortmund, Stuttgart, Düsseldorf and Bremen. Leipzig and Dresden, in the east, come just behind Nuremberg, with just under half a million inhabitants each. Although it is not the norm, it is still possible today to find Germans living in rural communities who speak only dialect, hardly using High German (*Hochdeutsch*) at all and who feel far more attached to their particular local region than to Germany as a whole.

Until recently, when an influx of refugees came from Eastern Europe, Germany had one of the lowest birth rates in the world. Amongst a population of approximately 82 million, there are now around 7 million foreigners. The Turks are by far the largest group, with nearly 2 million, followed, in order of size, by those from the former Yugoslavia (this was always a large group, now swelled by the many war refugees), Italians, Greeks, Poles, Austrians, Romanians, Spaniards, Iranians, Portuguese, Americans, Dutch and many more (*ibid.*:71). It is worth remembering two facts about Germany's foreign population. Nearly half of them have been living in Germany for at least ten years, and more than two-thirds of the children born to foreign parents were born in Germany, although being born in Germany does not give them German nationality (see p. 9).

NOTES

- 1 This quote, so often referred to in the context of West German politics, was first used by F.R. Allemann (1956) *Bonn ist nicht Weimar*, Cologne: Kiepenheuer und Witsch.
- 2 See for example Pulzer (1995).
- 3 For a concise summary of the economic and political systems of the former GDR (1949–90), see Parkes (1997: [Chapter 1](#)).

- 4 Figures taken from 'Die Einheit im Spiegel der Demoskopie', an article in the magazine *Deutschland*, no. 4 (August 1995).

RECOMMENDED READING

- Facts About Germany* (also published in German as *Tatsachen über Deutschland*) (1995), highly recommended to all students of German Studies, available free from the Embassy for the FRG in London.
 Smith *et al.* (1996), especially the Introduction and final chapter.
 Watson (1995), especially the Preface and Introduction.

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