

Summary

ORAL HISTORY AND THE EXPERIENCE OF POLITICS

4

Dora Schwarzstein, in memoriam

Edda Lía Crespo

16

Memorializing effervescence

Dora Schwarzstein

17

Seven crucial points concerning reunification
of Germany

Alexander von Plato

25

The radicalization of oral history

José Carlos Sebe Bom Meihy

31

ARCHIVES AND PROJECTS

42

Seven crucial points concerning reunification of Germany

Alexander von Plato

Institut für Geschichte und Biographie
der Fernuniversität Hagen, Germany

The reunification of Germany was an event of global importance. It is no wonder that there are myths and fights about the merits of the politicians in different countries, among politicians of particular countries, about the civil rights movement and so on. The sharpest struggles are those among former Soviet leaders and between the German and American politicians. My analysis of the politics leading to German reunification focuses on some of these disagreements.

The main sources for my analysis are, on the one hand, files from the Gorbachev Foundation in Russia of all meetings Gorbachev had with Western politicians. These files were closed until now. As well there were some minutes of the Politburo, and I read East and West German files. On the other hand, I used about 80 interviews with nearly all the important politicians and members of the civil rights movement in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) of that time. These interviews were made in 1999 and 2000 for a docudrama on reunification, produced by the Second German TV channel (ZDF) and directed by Hans-Christoph Blumenberg, who also conducted most of the interviews. I conducted 15 of those interviews with George Bush (senior), his Foreign Minister James Baker, his security advisor Condoleezza Rice, with some of the team around Marga-

ret Thatcher, with the main advisors of Gorbachev and some of his most important enemies in Russia and a short one with Gorbachev himself, with members of the civil rights movement of the GDR, with the Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher, with the main advisor of Chancellor Kohl, and with the last Prime Minister of the GDR, Lothar de Maizière.

From my analysis of these sources, I would like to address seven points that are crucial in my opinion.¹

1. Who gave the starting signal?

One of the most important fights about the history of German reunification is that between German and American politicians. It is a struggle which is fought in a very polite way. The German politicians reject the American opinion that the Bush administration gave the starting signal for reunification in May 1989 when Bush demanded a new European and German policy in a speech given in Germany. In this speech Bush stated that there could be no "European House" à la Gorbachev if people could not move from room to room. He voiced his desire for the right of self-determination for the whole of Germany and for

all countries of Eastern Europe. He finally asserted: "Berlin must be the next point. For the founder of NATO these hopes were a dream far away. Now this hope is the new task of the Atlantic Alliance."²²

American advisors claim that at the time the leading party of Chancellor Kohl, the Christian Democratic Party (CDU), had intended to cancel reunification as a political task from its program in opposition to the new policy of George Bush. The Germans deny this and criticize the claim that giving the starting signal was an American initiative. The German Foreign Minister Genscher, for instance, says that the Americans try to change history from a today perspective with the intention of enhancing their role in events. All the German political leaders have the same opinion. However, the files show that the Americans did give the first signal to move toward reunification. Yet, there is no evidence to support the American contention about the position of the CDU.

2. Which Soviet leaders were against German reunification?

The fiercest disagreement about the political history of reunification is that among former Soviet leaders, between those who later became putschists against Gorbachev, and Gorbachev and his crew. The first accuse Gorbachev of being a traitor to the interests of the Soviet Union. In their view he was responsible for the collapse of the Soviet Union. With the knowledge of the later conflicts, Gorbachev and the German politicians say that all these political enemies of Gorbachev were against reunification. Therefore German politicians and the Chancellor explain their policy for a rapid reunification by the fact that the enemies of Gorbachev were against re-

unification. However, my research shows that even the main influential opponents of reunification, like KGB-boss Krjuchkev and Marshall Achromejev, were neither opposed to Gorbachev nor to reunification at the time. Rather, they were against the American-German policy to extend NATO to the East (although Baker promised to leave NATO in the present borders) and exclude the Soviet Union from a European security system.

These contradictions give an idea of the importance, at the time and ever since, of the question about who was the first to give the starting signal for the reunification policy. Today the question still seems to be essential for the self-images of the protagonists and for the "tradition communities" in the different states which shared and were united by the wish to prove to themselves and to posterity that they were honorable representatives of national interests.

3. A putsch against Gorbachev by the military or a coup d'etat in his interest?

Often it has been said, especially by the American and German leaders, that Gorbachev had been threatened by the Soviet military in 1989 and in the first half of 1990. Krjuchkev and Ligachev are of the opinion that the enemies of Gorbachev and later putschists (Marshall Achromejev, KGB chief Krjuchkev and, with differences, Ligachev) were at that time weaker than it must have seemed to Kohl, Thatcher or Mitterrand, for instance, and to their secret services. In fact, the presumed opposition was probably closer then to the politics of Gorbachev than they would like to confess today. Gorbachev declared in 1990 that a Soviet marshal would occupy his own seat the day after he signed

a German reunification treaty. Later, in 1999, he said he had not been threatened by the Soviet military.³

The opponents of Gorbachev “forget” that they had been “Gorbachev-men”. They try to present themselves as Gorbachev enemies from the beginning although they cannot say what power the Soviet Union had at that time to hinder the German-American policy. It must be remembered that the Soviet Union, the Warsaw Treaty and the Soviet economy had collapsed.

My present research, however, discloses other plans for a coup d'état, not *against* but in *support of* Gorbachev. Aleksander Jakovlev had strongly recommended to Gorbachev (according to Cernaev: “supplicated”) that he should effect a coup d'état with the aim of liberating himself from the power of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and to restrict the power of the party. Jakovlev argued that Gorbachev should be elected by the Congress of People's Deputies as president of the Union, the party organization should be cut, the State Planning Commission should be closed down as the representative of the military industrial complex, Ryshkov should be removed from his office as head of the government, and a multiparty-system should be declared. In Jakovlev's view, if Gorbachev did not take these steps then everything would “break down”.⁴

Gorbachev did not do this, as is generally well known. Rather, he came under pressure during 1990 mostly because of domestic affairs especially the economic crisis and independence movements in the Baltic states. These were the real reasons for the appearance of an opposition to Gorbachev's government.

4. Changing strategies on the Soviet side –a neutral unified Germany, within a European security system or within an expanded NATO?

All Soviet politicians knew since November 1st 1989 and the visit of Egon Krenz, the successor of Erich Honecker as the General Secretary in the GDR, that the GDR economy was very different from everything that Honecker had stated three weeks before, at the 40th anniversary of the GDR. At the end of the meeting with Krenz, Gorbachev asked: “Is it so bad?” and Krenz agreed.

There is only one single sentence about this long and intensive talk with Krenz in a protocol of the Politburo meeting two days later, probably written by Cernaev or Medvedev: “One third of the GDR's living costs are higher than their circumstances would allow (Die DDR lebt zu zwei Dritteln über ihre Verhältnisse).”⁵ The Soviet leader knew, after this meeting, that the GDR-economy might be a millstone on their neck if the GDR was destabilized any further. In the same meeting of the Politburo Shewardnadse said: “It might be better when the Germans destroy the wall by themselves.”

These are only some proofs for my thesis that by the end of 1989, the leading Soviet politicians needed to find a strategy to counter the American-German one for reunification within the NATO, planned by the Americans since the spring of 1989 and evident at the latest by the end of November 1989.

However, my present research in the East German files which have been opened and the Soviet Russian files shows that although the Soviet leaders knew all this, they insisted on supporting the GDR as a stabilizing factor in Europe during

the next months and asserting that reunification was "not on the agenda of international politics" (Gorbachev). At the end of 1989 Shewardnadse discussed different possibilities and conditions for German reunification without any consequences in front of European leaders in Brussels, so that it became clear to western politicians that the Soviets were helpless in finding a clear strategy.

After a short time, when it was obvious that the GDR would fail, Gorbachev suggested a neutral confederation of both Germans within both NATO and the Warsaw Treaty. But the Eastern Alliance collapsed just at the time he made the proposal. From the end of April 1990 there were then discussions within the inner circle of Gorbachev advisors and with Lothar de Maizière, chancellor Kohl's advisor Horst Teltschik and French president Mitterrand about a unified Germany within a European Security System rather than under the NATO. However, at the end of May 1990, Gorbachev was in Washington and agreed with Bush to a unified Germany within NATO provided the Germans decided this way.

The Soviet files and the interviews also contain clear evidence that the Gorbachev leadership thought the issue of Germany had to be solved before discussions on a new security system in Europe could start. They did not make a European security system which included the Soviet Union and the United States a *precondition* for German reunification. Had they done so before the GDR and the Warsaw Treaty broke down, they would have been in a position to bargain. But after the collapse of the GDR and the Warsaw Treaty the Soviets could not get anything for the GDR. They assumed with a nearly naïve hope that the security system would come, if only they conceded to reunification before, because—as Cernaev confirmed recently—the West had assured this se-

curity system to the Soviets in general formulations.

In my opinion, this is the crucial point for the failure of the Soviet policy. When they realized their own naïveté it was too late. The inner problems had grown enormously, the economy was in a big crisis, the decline of the Soviet Union was under way, the independence movements in eastern and middle eastern Europe were increasing—and all naïve hopes atomized. The West had no reason to remember previous and rather unclear agreements. It was not easy for Cernaev to admit this, but he did not explain this naïveté, and added: "However the West and especially Kohl kept their word concerning all fixed arrangements."⁶

In opposition to Cernaev, Gorbachev himself said that he wanted NATO membership for the united Germany. This statement does not fit in with any of his strategies during 1989/90. It seems to me that Gorbachev is trying to justify himself to history—afterwards.

5. The western Europeans

The present picture among historians on this question is that the western European politicians were against German reunification with the exception of the Socialist Spanish leader Gonzales. This is correct for Margaret Thatcher's government which tried to hinder German reunification at all costs. However, it is not true concerning French policy under François Mitterrand. The Soviet files paint a very different picture—and quite new to me—of the French President. He was the only one who cautiously tried to lead Gorbachev, since December 1989, to a position favoring a unified Germany within a European security system. Mitterrand had to be cautious because he did not

want to endanger western European integration. He tried to combine the problem of West-East-European integration and Western European unification, to help Gorbachev against his enemies and support German reunification but in the framework of an European Security System. That was a very complicated strategy, especially given his timetable: first (Western) European integration and, second, German reunification. This strategy could only be successful on the precondition that Gorbachev would support Mitterrand's vision. Jaques Attali, Mitterrand's advisor, said that the French President was very disappointed about Gorbachev's unclear positions at that time. The Americans, in turn, were aware of a special French European policy, which could reduce the influence of the United States in Europe.

6. The Lithuanian and the German questions

The existence of a Lithuanian independence movement since December 1989 alerted Gorbachev and the whole Soviet leadership to the danger of the collapse of the Soviet Union. Gorbachev felt anxious and alarmed to the point of seriously planning military intervention in Lithuania. Chancellor Kohl and President Mitterrand tried to hold back the Lithuanian leaders in an attempt to protect Gorbachev's position in the Soviet Union. Kohl feared that Lithuanian independence could endanger his reunification policy. However, the files and the interviews clearly demonstrate that it was the other way around: the Lithuanian independence movement helped the West German policy for reunification. All members of the Soviet leadership –Gorbachev–men and opponents– were too occupied by the inde-

pendence movement in Lithuania, the nationality question and the fall of the Soviet Union. These issues had become more important than the German question. From everything we know, especially from Politburo files, interviews, memoirs and diaries, it seems that the Gorbachev leadership and the Politburo spent over 75 percent of the time dealing with inner problems while the German question took only about 10 percent.

7. Gorbachev and democracy

My present research reading the minutes of the Gorbachev meetings shows that he, sometimes together with Shevardnadze, decided all questions relating to German reunification without the Politburo. There were no discussions, there was no committee concerning reunification. This seems not very democratic although he and his foreign minister tried to introduce some democratic standards to international diplomacy (most important was their "non-interference-politics" in the Soviet hegemony region in Eastern Europe). However, what does democracy mean in this question? Which institutions would support the Gorbachev leadership? There was only the Politburo and the Central Committee and they were not at all freely elected institutions. Therefore Gorbachev had to take decisions without democratic institutions or else make a coup d'etat against the Communist Party and rely on the Deputies Congress, which had a semblance of being an elected institution. This was the solution to this problem as was suggested by Jakovlev, aware of the problem, when he advanced his plan for a putsch in the interests of Gorbachev. And Cernaev said to me that the gravest mistake made by Gorbachev was to trust the support of the

Communist Party.

All this shows that Gorbachev was not the “master tactician” he is said to be, at least concerning the German question. However, no Hercules of world history would have been successful to solve all questions Gorbachev was confronted with.

And my last remark: the problems interviewing prominent people

When I started my research my opinion was that interviews with prominent people—in this case with prominent politicians—would not make much sense, because they are used to journalists and the media as a whole. Indeed, I expected that they would use me for their aims and would say nothing new or of importance. All these thoughts are right, but nevertheless I was wrong. The interviews were very helpful: they highlighted the differences between the various tendencies within a government or party, the contradictions between the chancelleries and the foreign ministries and between the representatives from different countries. The diplomatic documents contained in the files hid or nearly ground away contradictions. But the background supplied by the interviews with

the protagonists enabled me to discern and understand those contradictions. I also gathered some very new information like Jakovlev's proposal for a coup d'état supporting Gorbachev.

Notes

¹ See my book on German reunification, *Die Vereinigung Deutschlands—ein weltpolitisches Machtspiel. Bush, Kohl, Gorbatschow und die geheimen Moskauer Protokolle*, Berlin, Christoph Links Verlag, 2002. A longer version of the present article in Alexander Von Plato, “The fight about the history and the interpretation of the reunification of Germany” in *The power of oral history*, vol. iv, Philippe Denis and James Worthington (eds.), Pietermaritzburg, South Africa, International Oral History Association, Sinomlando Project University of Natal, 2002, pp. 2096-2115.

² See Philip Zelikow and Condoleeza Rice, *Sternstunde der Diplomatie. Die deutsche Einheit und das Ende der Spaltung Europas (amerikanische Ausgabe 1995)*, Berlin, 1997, German edition, p. 62, for Bush's speech in Rheingold-Halle.

³ Interviews with Kohl, Gorbachev and Bush in a television program conducted by Timothy Ash, Berlin, September 11, 1999.

⁴ Anatoli Cernaev, *Diary*, January 29, 1990.

⁵ Zitiert nach den Mitschriften der Politbüro-Sitzung vom 3. November 1989, 589.

⁶ Interview with Anatoli Cernaev, December 5, 6 y 11, 2001.