30 Years After Reunification, Germany Is Still Two Countries

Why Eastern Germans are embracing the far right.

By Anna Sauerbrey

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BERLIN — Nov. 9 marks the 30th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall. There will be no lack of commemoration — but there will also be very little celebration. Today the country is once again divided along East-West lines, and growing more so. As it does, the historical narrative of what really happened in the years after 1989 is shifting as well.

Only a few years ago, when my country consecutively celebrated the 25th anniversary of the wall’s demise and of German reunification in 1990, the official mood was one of victory and hope.

President Joachim Gauck, a former East German pastor who had played a role in the Communist regime’s demise, then later oversaw the declassification of the archives of the Stasi secret police, praised the East German masses who, in their “desire for freedom,” stood up to “overwhelm” the “oppressor” — an uprising, he said, in the tradition of the French Revolution. A year later, he spoke optimistically about German reunification, stressing the dwindling differences between eastern and western Germans.

He wasn’t entirely wrong: After the mass unemployment and deprivation following the breakdown of the socialist state economy during the transition years of the 1990s, the economy in eastern Germany has been on a slow, steady recovery. Regional identities, once solidly split between East and West, were softening — the Allensbach Institute, a polling organization, found that since 2000, more people on both sides of the old border were identifying as simply “Germans.”

Then came the migration crisis. Germans across the country reacted angrily to Angela Merkel’s decision in September 2015 to allow in more than a million refugees, but the backlash in the former East Germany was especially toxic. In Clausnitz, a mob tried to prevent a group of newly arrived migrants from exiting a bus. In Dresden, a protester carried a mock gallows through the streets.

The crisis has passed and the rage has cooled, but the scar remains in the form of rabid support for the far-right, xenophobic Alternative for Germany party, known by its German initials as AfD. On Sunday, the eastern states of Brandenburg and Saxony will hold elections, and the AfD is expected to score record results — up to 25 percent, compared with national polls showing a stagnating 11 percent to 14 percent.

At the same time, a recent Allensbach survey shows that voters in places like Brandenburg and Saxony once again feel distinctly “Eastern”: While 71 percent of West Germans replied this summer that they felt simply like Germans, only 44 percent of Easterners replied the same way.

The migrant crisis didn’t cause this division, though. Nor did the continued regional economic divide. The causes are deeper, but understanding them requires revising the story we tell about the immediate post-Wall years.
Conventional wisdom has it that the 1989 revolution came from the ground up, by the masses of East Germans who were sick of totalitarian rule. But recently in The Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, a leading daily newspaper, the historian Ilko-Sascha Kowalczuk argued that in fact the revolution was driven by a small number of activist groups, and that “normal citizens” watched “from behind the curtains and waited to see what would happen.”

What seems like an academic dispute in fact raises fundamental questions about Germany’s post-Communist identity. How many East Germans wanted the revolution? How many were tired of being “East Germans,” and actively sought unity with the West? Was Mr. Gauck wrong when he said that East Germans “overwhelmed” their oppressors? Or were they passive participants who were themselves overwhelmed, only to see the pain of their sudden dislocation written out of history?

The same thing happened during the migration crisis: Eastern Germans again felt that history was being decided without anybody asking their opinion. This time, they’ve had enough, as three decades of buried rage and fear have surfaced in a toxic, xenophobic nationalism.

This narrative, too, is probably incomplete. It has nevertheless gained traction, not least because the AfD is exploiting it. The party has called on voters to “complete the revolution,” evoking the feeling that whatever injustices East Germans had to suffer since 1989 could be redeemed in a populist uprising. The most popular chant from the 1989 demonstrations — “Wir sind das Volk,” or “We are the people” has become as a right-wing slogan, too.

Hence the muted tone of the coming anniversary. Less triumphalism, less high-flying talk about unity, and at least some recognition that East Germans suffered “from that caesura,” as Angela Merkel put it in an interview with the weekly newspaper Die Zeit. But so far, the rest of Germany doesn’t have a plan for responding to this upsurge in anger from the East.

When, in his 2015 speech, Mr. Gauck compared the task of integrating the recently arrived refugees to integrating East and West Germany, he said the second task was easier: “East and West Germans speak the same language, look back on the same culture, the same history.”

It turns out we do not. Thirty years after the wall came down, Germans have at last started to recognize how very different we really are — and that a truly unified Germany is still a long way to go.
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