1991-04

The Soviet Union and German Unification

Wettig, Gerhard

Boston University Center for the Study of Conflict, Ideology, and Policy

http://hdl.handle.net/2144/3468

Boston University
On October 6, 1989, the East German communists triumphantly celebrated the fortieth anniversary of their state. Five weeks later the Berlin Wall that protected them against their co-citizens' drive to emigrate to West Germany fell, and the country embarked upon unification. East Germany had been in crisis ever since its artificial creation as a Soviet colony, capable of survival only thanks to massive armed protection or repression when necessary. The latent crisis became manifest when in the fall of 1988 Erich Honecker decided to resist both Gorbachev's perestroika and domestic pressure. Preparations were made for a civil war emergency. The Kremlin responded in August 1989 by instructing its forces stationed in East Germany to abstain from involvement in the internal conflict. Thus the Soviet colony was deprived of the USSR's military guarantee. It was only logical that its continued existence became impossible.

To be sure, at the time the Soviet leaders did not realize the consequences. Not unlike Western detentists, they felt that East Germany was a consolidated socialist state that would opt for reformism once Honecker had been ousted. The Kremlin's unwillingness to do anything to defend the old regime became a crucial domestic factor. Moscow was sympathetic to the spreading discontent, once the ouster of Honecker's successor, Egon Krenz, would open the way for Gorbachev's favorite, Hans Modrow. Travel concessions offered were rejected as grossly insufficient, and Krenz eventually decided to allow temporarily a liberal border regime. The news, however, had an unexpected impact. Huge crowds spontaneously flocked to the border demanding free passage. The authorities were helpless and during the night of November 9-10, 1989, acquiesced
in the elimination of all controls. From then on, the communist regime dared not restore the border restrictions. East Germany had to live with open borders—the very state of affairs with which it could not coexist.

The Kremlin publicly applauded the opening of the Wall, but privately it had grave misgivings. Spontaneous actions had always been viewed with suspicion in Moscow. When, however, one week later the Soviet side succeeded in installing Modrow as prime minister, it was too late to repair the damage. As had been clearly foreseen in the Kremlin, East Germany would be unable to survive if it had to compete with democratic and prosperous West Germany. The only way out was to persuade Bonn to enter into a "contractual community" with East Berlin for the transfer of resources so as to stabilize a reformist communist regime. Chancellor Helmut Kohl was receptive to the suggestion, but supplemented it with the goal of eventual unification. In Moscow this idea was sharply rejected. The Kremlin felt that: a.) East Germany conceivably might depart from communism, but its "free choice" did not imply elimination of international borders or the abrogation of international obligations; b.) The country's role as a member of the Warsaw Pact was inviolable.

However, the Soviet concept had a weakness. It could be put into practice only if West Germany agreed to pay massive subsidies to East Germany while renouncing its claim to national unification. This was an illusion. Impressed by the increasingly strong East German public demand for rapid unification, Chancellor Kohl accelerated his schedule. By early January 1990 he was determined to press for early unification. Later that month Gorbachev felt that he had no option but to give in. After all, he lacked the material resources to buy an East Germany of his own choosing. At the same time he became aware that the USSR itself would need West German aid and support. Thus the establishment of a cooperative relationship with Bonn was required: East Germany's contribution to the Warsaw Pact was less crucial.

For a time there was hope on the part of the Soviet leadership that the Eastern Alliance's willingness to withdraw from East Germany would result in West Germany's
NATO membership being put in jeopardy. Gorbachev, however, appears to have been skeptical about such a prospect from the very beginning. To be sure, he can be assumed to have initiated Modrow's plan of January 31, 1990, for the neutralization of the prospective all-German state. But he was careful not to associate himself with the scheme: It was to be a trial balloon, no more. He was also careful to avoid rejection of an all-German membership of NATO until, on March 6, 1990, he adopted an anti-NATO posture—temporarily as it turned out.

The Soviet president never resorted to what would have been his strongest weapon to split the Germans from the Western alliance, i.e., a public campaign in Germany confronting the people with a choice between national unity and the Western politico-military orientation. The USSR political leadership refrained from fostering German neutralism, since it understood that the expected benefit of German and Western assistance in rebuilding the Soviet economy and coping with the trend toward political destabilization in the USSR would not be forthcoming if anti-Western policies were promoted at the same time.

From the very beginning, the Soviet decision to abandon East Germany entailed the clearly perceived consequence of military withdrawal from East Central Europe. What no one in the Kremlin appears to have expected, however, was the ultimate result—the disintegration of the Warsaw Pact. There were illusions in Moscow that, after the allies had been granted completely "free choice," a new type of mutual association would emerge on the basis of Soviet-perceived common security interests. Yet as early as April 1990 the Soviet leaders had to realize that the political consensus they had hoped for was lacking in the Warsaw Pact. When (then) Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze advocated non-acceptance of Germany's membership of NATO, he found himself alone, with Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary openly taking a diametrically opposed position. This represented crucial support for Bonn, which adamantly insisted upon maintenance of its NATO membership. It is true that Soviet diplomacy continued to put up stiff resistance, employing proposals such as a scheme for Germany's membership of both alliances. At first the Kremlin felt it would benefit
from delaying the process of negotiation. However, from early May on it realized that German unification had gained such momentum that it threatened to create \textit{faits accomplis} if the negotiations lagged behind it.

Beginning in December 1989, Gorbachev had to cope with increasingly harsh criticism from both old bureaucrats and military figures who resented the abandonment of the Soviet East European empire. Germany's inclusion in NATO was bound to be seen as the culmination of Soviet "defeatism," as a "humiliation" and a "defeat." If only for this reason, the Soviet president could not have afforded to make such a concession in the spring of 1990. Then in mid-year the imperialistic-reactionary opposition was formed, leading to the creation of the Russian Communist Party under Ivan Polozkov. Shortly afterward, however, Gorbachev succeeded in asserting his control over the CPSU at the 28th Congress. For the time being the second event was the more important. Gorbachev thus saw his chance to permit the inevitable to occur, i.e., German NATO membership, at a time when this concession still carried sufficient weight to buy keenly sought counterconcessions in terms of political and economic cooperation with the West, particularly with West Germany. On July 16, 1990, the Soviet president and the West German chancellor announced their agreement that the Germans themselves would decide which alliance they would join, and that a new cooperative relationship would be established between their two countries. Further, despite opposition from the imperialistic-reactionary forces that were gaining ground in the country, the Soviet government agreed that Germany would gain full sovereignty immediately on signature of the treaty by the four former "victor powers."

The Soviet military, which in late 1989 and early 1990 had been willing to prevent German unification by action that would have risked bringing Europe to the brink of war, vehemently rejected the concessions made to the West under the CFE agreement. They did what they could to minimize them by both circumventing and violating the treaty (e.g. by a massive arms withdrawal beyond the Murals and by assigning three armored divisions to the navy). Predictably, the Soviet military was reluctant to relinquish its positions in East Central Europe, particularly in East Germany, after
already having acquiesced in German unification. There was even a tendency within the military, as late as early 1991, to demand that the treaties with Germany on Soviet troop withdrawals should be revoked. However, the political leadership eventually prevailed, and had the USSR Supreme Soviet ratify the German treaties, ultimately as they stood, despite an initial reservation. In retrospect, the achievement of German independence was spared a great risk: It is doubtful whether in March 1991 enough rightist members of the USSR Supreme Soviet would have been willing to let the treaty pass, if they had still had the option of preventing Germany from becoming a sovereign state, and consequently of exploiting the denial of such sovereignty in order to demand renegotiation of all the agreements.