

# Striving to realise the European idea: Judging the news media's accounts of how the Berlin Wall gave impetus to a new order across Europe.

## Abstract

The 1990 European Community was taken by surprise, by the urgency of demands from the newly-elected Eastern European governments to become member countries. Those governments were honouring the mass social movement of the streets, the year before, demanding free elections and a liberal economic system associated with "Europe". The mass movement had actually been accompanied by much activity within institutional politics, in Western Europe, the former "satellite" states, the Soviet Union and the United States, to set up new structures – with German reunification and an expanded EC as the centre-piece.

This paper draws on the writer's doctoral dissertation on mass media in the collapse of the Eastern bloc, focused on the Berlin Wall – documenting both public protests and institutional negotiations. For example the writer as a correspondent in Europe from that time, recounts interventions of the German Chancellor, Helmut Kohl, at a European summit in Paris nine days after the "Wall", and separate negotiations with the French President, Francois Mitterrand -- on the reunification, and EU monetary union after 1992. Through such processes, the "European idea" would receive fresh impetus, though the EU which eventuated, came with many altered expectations. It is argued here that as a result of the shock of 1989, a "social" Europe can be seen emerging, as a shared experience of daily life -- especially among people born during the last two decades of European consolidation.

The paper draws on the author's major research, in four parts: (1) Field observation from the strategic vantage point of a news correspondent. This includes a treatment of evidence at the time, of the wishes and intentions of the mass public (including the unexpected drive to join the European Community), and those of governments, (e.g. thoughts of a "Tiananmen Square solution" in East Berlin, versus the non-intervention policies of the Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev). (2) A review of coverage of the crisis of 1989 by major news media outlets, treated as a history of the process. (3) As a comparison, and a test of accuracy and analysis; a review of conventional histories of the crisis appearing a decade later. (4) A further review, and test, provided by journalists responsible for the coverage of the time, as reflection on practice – obtained from semi-structured interviews

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**Introduction:**

The idea of a common “Europe” took a step further in its development with the “Wall” events of October – November 1989. In Eastern Europe crowds in the street were proclaiming identity with “Europe”, a pointed demand for separation from the Soviet Union, and an idea compatible with seeking to share in the economic prosperity of the Western Europeans. The Soviet President, Mikhail Gorbachev, shared in this consolidated view of Europe. In his desperate campaign for assistance from abroad, the call for sharing of a “common European home” was a theme of his speaking appearances, at Bonn, Paris, or at the European Parliament in Strasbourg (18.8.89).

The then European Community (EC) was already giving institutional shape to a generalised European entity, and this was no myth; the “1992” proposals for a completed single market, open internal frontiers and the Euro were being acted on concertedly. All would accelerate after 1992 and achievement of the consolidating Maastricht Treaty, as the East European states added great pressure to take things still further. Having had their revolutions, and having chosen new, non-communist governments at free elections in 1990, they had immediately sought to make formal applications to join the EC; and Western Europe was unready.

Nine days after the opening of the Berlin Wall, Saturday night 18.11.89, the twelve EC Heads of Government met in Paris for a special summit, to receive a briefing from Helmut Kohl, Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG). He raised the prospect of a reunified “Germany within Europe”, as opposed to a “German Europe”; the restored country would have to be a democracy and Germany would remain bound to the “1992” program for European unity; and so a constitutional, united Europe might absorb and provide reassurance against old nationalisms and fear of hegemony.

Yet the EC was slow to grasp the suddenly emerging new reality of a wider, and in aggregate poorer democratic Europe. As leaders huddled over the Maastricht plan, certain among them, *viz* Margaret Thatcher of the United Kingdom, equivocated on it, and looked for options to avoid German reunification -- along with any form of federal Europe that might frame it.

Journalists based at the large European Commission media centre in Brussels averred that as they proceeded into 1990 they did not see great expansion, Eastwards, as part of the news agenda; and were not briefed that way by politicians or officials. The impetus actually would come from the East. A long serving gallery member, Geoff Meade (1999), Europe Editor for the UK Press Association, had thought of the revolution as a “tabloid event” where

facts did not require explanation, and it then turned out to have unexpectedly far-reaching implications. When the EC began offering technical assistance to Eastern Europe, it missed the point that they wanted more than practical aid:

“The bulk of our coverage overlooked the direct and huge ramifications for the European Community... The EC itself was taken by surprise; it was like hearing of an earthquake; there were difficulties in understanding this challenge to all expectations, with this biblical movement of people in the early days of it. We all got it wrong. We thought of aid not expansion, and covered the day to day reactions from the Commission ... We could not see, for years, where it would lead.”

His colleague from across the briefing table, European Commission Spokesman, Niko Weghter (1999), recalled a 1990 visit to Eastern Europe with a Commissioner, astonished to find himself confronted with demands fast-tracked EC admission.

“All meetings from December 1989 into 1990 confirmed this inclination to prepare for membership ... When we saw Tadeus Mazowiecki [Polish Prime Minister] the first question was when can we join the EC; and in Prague they said forget previous relationships, forget Comecon, forget the Soviet Union, forget the neighbours, there was one alternative for them. They wanted to be part of the West. There was talk that we understood, of a ‘psychological desire to be part of a family’ ... People on the street in these countries know their future depends to an extent on Brussels.”

The present writer as a correspondent in 1989 attended to report on many of the key gatherings and speeches, talk with some of the principals and best informed observers, and in Eastern Europe share time with thousands of people conducting their movement in the streets. Therefore, he has come by an anecdotal route to form conclusions about the way that the fall of the Berlin Wall was a signal of the arrival of a new and consolidated Europe, a new expression of the European idea.

As the events of 1989 and 1990 proceeded all were faced with an “imagination gap”; there could be no assurance as to where those events might lead; journalists might have to report that the Berlin Wall could soon be breached, or that the Soviet Union might disintegrate, but could not believe it themselves. In the aftermath there was time to analyse the historical

processes of which the events in the news had formed a part, to reflect, and try to determine how well, or badly, reporting on the day reflected the actual pattern of developments.

### Project of Research

The research reported here on the Berlin Wall was undertaken to settle some questions about the full character and significance of what had occurred in 1989. The research problem became:- By what process did the post-war geopolitical settlement in Europe collapse, and noting the ubiquitous presence of mass media, what roles did media have to play in that process? Given that the collapse was an important realignment of power and a psychological shock, it would be an obvious topic for study; the media perspective was in the field of expertise of this researcher, so the effort was made to assess whether the media role would be marginal or very significant, and in which ways. In the event the two parts of the study would interact comprehensively. Studying media products and the work of journalists would show, dependably it would transpire, how history was being made. The narrative of the collapse of the communist states resolved itself into certain broad themes, to do with the collapse of the Soviet Union, German reunification and the expansion of the European Union – with archived media accounts proving the best ready guide and source of facts and interpretation of the process of history.

### Methodology

The experience of reporting in 16 European countries including the USSR, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Hungary, the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and Romania was initial field work for the study – highly impressionistic observation. In the aftermath, diaries, news products by the writer and contacts with others, *viz* colleagues from international news media, contributed to the background understanding; and this led into a doctoral project completed in 2002.

That study was undertaken in the following parts: (a) A contents review of a sample of “quality” media outlets committed to chronicling major events (*The Times*, *International Herald Tribune*, *Weekend Guardian* with *Le Monde*, *The Australian*, and Australian ABC Radio and Television News), for the six-months period 1.7.89 to 31.1.90, *see* Appendix 1. Themes were extracted forming an historical narrative, noting the published reports on events and commentaries to do with the unravelling of the situation in

Eastern Europe. Altogether 5297 news reports, newspaper features or current affairs pieces for radio or television were noted; 455 by the writer himself. (b) Histories of that process appearing in the decade after the “Wall” were consulted. (c) A panel of 23 journalists – American, Australia, British, French and German – who worked on the coverage took part in semi-structured interviews to reflect on practice during the time of crisis.

The parts in this triangulated approach produced substantially the same results, delivering a conclusion that the daily coverage by leading Western news media judged in terms of accuracy and perspective was successful. As the events of 1989 were marked by massive public protests, additional reading for this project also included the literature on mass social movements (*See* Gamson 1968, 1975; Kahn and Zald 1990; McAdam et al 1996; Oberschall 1973; Rushing and Zald 1976; Tarrow 1995).

### Analysis

The treatment of the data that emerged from this study delivered the following interpretation of what took place: It was a two-track process, on one hand a mass social movement, on the other a playing out of decisions in the domain of institutional politics, mostly government to government interaction at international level. For journalists monitoring it, the task would be to accompany the crowds, and obtain information of one kind, and then to revert to the more accustomed business of dealing with the powerful – in this case, both East and West, often shaken and themselves uncertain of what was occurring. Participants had the sensation of witnessing collapse in Europe, which moved through the strongest bastions of authoritarian control, in East Berlin, Prague or Bucharest, and would extend towards Moscow. Very early however the now orthodox, converse view emerged that the source was in the Soviet Union, causing the European change.

### Soviet crisis precipitates the change in Europe

Contemporary analysis was diagnosing the USSR as in terminal crisis, an unbalanced economy with an expensive, productive military and scientific sector, and severely neglected consumer sector, the source of social discord and dysfunction. American estimates had defence taking 16% of GDP, \$US250-billion p.a. in 1990, equalling the United States, on a far smaller economic base (Moynahan 1994 399). By Gorbachev’s own account a long run of low export prices for oil, the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, and

earthquake disaster in Armenia had been bankrupting the state. Mortality rates were deteriorating, alcoholism rife, dietary abuse extensive.

Where the Khrushchev goal of matching the United States in heavy industrial production was actually achieved, the West had moved on to employing ever more efficient economic models. The *Guardian* Moscow correspondent Martin Walker (1993 233-34, 282, 328; 1999) articulated a plausible view that modernisation specifically through the advent of computers had sealed the Cold War fate of the USSR. Electronic data processing had accompanied and made possible financial liberalisation, and with it more thorough and rapid utilisation of resources. The weak communications infrastructure of the Soviet Union, with for instance ten phone lines per hundred of population, often of low quality, *versus* 80 in the United States (Moynaham 1994 401) worsened it. Unable to obtain capital to bankroll a refurbishment the system went into rapid decline. In this climate secessionist movements in the Soviet republics emerged in strength, so that violent outbreaks, like the nationalistic conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, were actually a more sensational sign of the times than the far more peaceful eruptions in Eastern Europe.

The media record prepared by this writer produced a telling coincidence of dates, showing that whenever Gorbachev was away campaigning in the West, a new violent upsurge would take place somewhere in the republics. Pressing on with his reform projects for *perestroika* and *glasnost*, against growing panic and resistance within Party and government, the psychological pressure on the man Gorbachev was something to be guessed at.

The Gorbachev “roadshow” in Europe certainly brought home the crisis to observers. Facing the unilateral determination of his administration to get out of the arms race, American negotiators would be surprised at sessions held in Western Europe, with sudden concessions on reducing armaments, notably the controversial intermediate range missiles, and conventional force levels. More strategically for the present argument, Mikhail Gorbachev let it be known the USSR would no longer rescue the Eastern Bloc governments in a crisis. There would be no crushing costs of any kind to preserve them; no more interventions as in Berlin 1953, Budapest 1956 or Prague 1968; priority was attached to amelioration of relations with the West; the die was cast.

### **Gorby, save us**

The first demonstration of that reality had been the victory of Solidarity in the Polish elections of 4 and 18 June 1989. Inability to create wealth could not be hidden by 1989. Poles joked bitterly: “We pretend to work and they pretend to pay us.” The visit of the Polish Pope in 1979, and again in 1983, had seen the citizens organise their own crowd control and literally turn their backs on the communist police. Amid renewed economic crisis the Solidarity union movement forced the regime to the round table. A negotiated settlement gave the communist party a bloc of guaranteed seats at open elections, but it failed to win even three contested seats it needed to keep a majority in the joint houses of parliament. Repeated contacts by the outgoing government with Moscow produced no intervention from Gorbachev, who congratulated the winners. Taxi drivers commented on the shuttling to Moscow: “Papa, Papa!”, they laughed. Incredible as it seemed at the time, the parties talked on towards an inevitable, actual transfer of power -- and word spread outside of Poland that change, after all, might be admitted.

By the Fortieth anniversary celebrations of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) in early October, thousands of people there, also had tested the new circumstances, in their Trabant-born exodus through Hungary. In that country of “Goulash communism” of the preceding decades, a reform faction was emboldened to push for control of the Party, and opened the frontier with Austria.

Consequently the issue of hundreds of entry visas to East Berlin to the international media, to mark the country’s anniversary, occurred in a climate of palpable crisis and rebellion. Thousands of demonstrators gathered on the Alexanderplatz famously shouting out to the guest of honour: “Gorby, save us!” Gorbachev was not wholly restrained in his dealings with the die-hard East German regime. “Those who cannot keep up with the march of history will fall by the wayside”, he told the Workers’ Party, and let his spokesperson, Gennady Gerasimov, tell journalists about it. He reiterated the message in an impromptu speech in the street, while visiting a war memorial. Western correspondents, including this writer, scrambled to improvise a chain of translations from Russian, to German then English. The Gorbachev manoeuvre was to promote change within the East German communist party but its ramifications went far further.

## The power of the street and the corridors of power

Formal or institutional politics was giving ground to the very unexpected, including actions taken by citizens, seizing on opportunity. Mass social movements will usually follow a familiar course; Eastern Europe no exception:

- They will focus on an ongoing grievance among publics.
- Some crisis or weakening of authority will bring out numbers in protest.
- Curiously these oppositionist forces will look for a model of action and find it in the past, hence resort to barricades as in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, or mass parades.
- Recalling that movements arise when the regime is off-balance, the protests have force; unsurprisingly they grow very rapidly, and fear evaporates.
- The movements have demands, which are represented in very succinct, very targeted short statements, hence, everywhere in 1989: Communist party to resign; remove any mention of its leading role from the constitution; hold free elections; permit full human rights and a demand economy, and in Germany, restore the single Fatherland.
- The movements find leaders as well, or the leaders find them; trusted and experienced oppositionists, would-be reformers from within made marginal by the government, or custodians of conscience, found often in churches.
- The movements being very young and improvised, in 1989 coming from a void in civil society, when citizens could hardly organise public life for themselves, had no standing and enduring structures – no branches or councils, budgets or bank accounts, membership lists or cards.
- Inevitably such movements must divide and fragment, unable to sustain their intense activity and solidarity; so they would hurry to get results.
- To compensate for lack of orthodox political resources, they would use mass media. Even bad publicity could count as good attention-getting in this connection; messages going out *via* media would sustain gatherings, e.g. “same time, same place, next week”; reporters for their part would revel in the strength of a story involving a tribe up in arms.

## Late 1989 was a time for mass social movements on a classic plan.

In Czechoslovakia movement politics carried the dissidents around Vaclav Havel to government within a year. Yet as the process there wound down, from the November days of the Velvet Revolution in Wenceslaus Square and the “Magic Lantern” theatre, through sometimes bitter wrangles with the other side, one of the principals was expressing the anxieties of many as to the possible flimsiness of power from the street: “We can’t continue with this anarchist democracy, with everything based on good will and working twenty-four hours a day. We shall have to change into a proper, organised political force”, said Jan Urban, of Civic Forum, December 1989.

Even amid the shock of rebellion; business still needed to be done. Institutional politics, the politics of government, diplomacy, the corridors of power would adapt and reassert itself. The abdication of the *Nomenklatura* had created vacuums and unsettled questions, which political establishments, everywhere, set out to try and resolve.

By Saturday 4 November in Berlin one million people in the street were demonstrating impatience, for certain express changes, like resignation of the communist government, and a free vote. They were unafraid. A month before, an arcane chain of events had put to bed the fear of a European “Tiananmen solution”, in the city of Leipzig. It was a mix of formal politics, if only in the guise of the collapsing GDR regime, together with the politics of the movement. Facts were muddled but enough was brought to light, and confirmed over time.

## The GDR fiasco and the ‘China solution’

The shadow of the massacre at Tiananmen Square (4.6.89) had been hanging over the political unravelling in East Germany. As the foreign media army reported the degeneration of the Fortieth anniversary event into a full-pitched public revolt; another visit to East Berlin, that of the Deputy Prime Minister of China, Yao Yulin, had raised thoughts of perhaps a very bad outcome.

It was not Western news media on their own which began public speculation that the GDR, a rigid post-Stalinist regime, would attempt to save itself through violence. Threats were made by the regime itself, quickly noted by the visiting journalists, many of whom had been at Tiananmen Square, less than five months before. Dissident leaders in East Berlin associated with the Protestant Church had passed on to correspondents, that they’d been told by a senior government official to “remember China”. Whether a realistic threat

or bluff to discourage protest, it was inflammatory with more to come. The State President, Erich Honecker, referred to the June events in Beijing while hosting a function for Deputy Premier Yao, and his wife, Margot Honecker, a Minister, spoke of 'an armed workers' militia, ready, she said, to defend the revolution. (That armed formation, it transpired, had been much wound down over the years).

After the weekend Anniversary demonstrations attention shifted to the growing parades of defiance each Monday night in Leipzig. In a much-investigated incident, 9.10.89, Honecker demanded that the protest be put down in an exemplary way. Troops and police were issued with live ammunition; authorities on the ground reported to their superiors that the crowd was growing much bigger than expected. Troops in East Berlin had followed a procedure of containing and catching protestors rather than dispersing them; the same could make for a volatile situation.

The sources for several reports on the proposed crack-down were mostly communist officials, from the divided and disintegrating state apparatus. Three American writers published what became close to the standard account (Binder et al 1989). They said Egon Krenz as security chief travelled to Leipzig to countermand an order to shoot, continuing: "There was a written order from Honecker for a Chinese solution", said Marcus Wolf, the retired head of Germany's spy agencies ... But by then many in the politburo had come to the decision that Mr Honecker had to go. In Leipzig, Kurt Mansur, the director of the *Gerwandhaus* music theatre, and some local party officials opened urgent discussions on averting a clash. When tens of thousands took to the streets of Leipzig that night the police did not interfere. The 'revolution from below' was under way..."

Other reports said Krenz had fallen out with Honecker and had intervened at Leipzig by telephone from the capital. In the event, later in October Erich Honecker was stripped of his official positions and a new politburo assembled to face the coming storm.

Why didn't an atrocity happen? East Germany was far from isolated and with the advance of communication technologies it had become impossible for authorities to keep out news of events around the country. The numbers alone in Leipzig were unanswerable, building up from 1200 people in the previous September, to 500000 by 6 November. Western television was received throughout most of East Germany; telephone links to the West had become rather easy; even pictures shot on small amateur video cameras were being regularly smuggled to outside television stations. The mass social movement

of the day was able to use witnessing mass media to protect its members, to a good degree.

Some weeks later the Leipzig demonstrations became the scene for a key development, the adoption by the movement, of demands for reunification. Reporters in the crowd, including this writer, noticed the West German flag being waved and engaged the persons holding it in conversation. The leader, a Leipzig doctor, said the idea was a logical development if the regime was going to fall. Thereafter flags brought across by various parties from the West, and the demands for reunification, began to flourish.

### Helmut Kohl, the Berlin Wall and German reunification

In the West, the change process, though much in the public mind, was much more an institutional one, to a large degree managed by the Bonn government under Helmut Kohl. Political leaders working hard at studying the pattern of events in the Eastern bloc, began diplomacy to try and manage a sweeping political, economic and social change in Europe. Coverage of this activity by the news media, although dealing with the unknown, was a relatively familiar matter of following a schedule of meetings and announcements, then understanding, interpreting and reporting. Managing imponderables in the theatre of street politics was always harder, if more exciting. For the review of what took place in this politicking, using the media record; 280 reports and features were surveyed, taking in both events coverage and commentaries from guest writers, *viz* academic specialists, or "insiders" such as Dr Henry Kissinger.

The idea of a German reunification had insinuated itself into the flow of events and debate by September 1989, and one outcome of the media review was to discover the accuracy of the Americans' understanding of the situation throughout. The United States Ambassador at Bonn, Vernon Walters, presumably with access to US and German intelligence, offered periodic, and prescient public statements. In a radio interview, quoted in the *International Herald Tribune* on 4 September he said the exodus of East Germans through Hungary showed it was "abnormal to have two Germanies" and he believed Germany "could be reunited in the near future" (Duffield 2009 183). Few others dared to make that surmise at that moment.

The federal German constitution had of course been designed to admit the five Eastern Lander to the republic after a free public vote, so that in legal terms reunification could be done with seamless ease. Kohl moved towards this

determinedly, in a process public enough for news media to construct in “real time” a dependable historical narrative, which can be understood as a succession of main episodes.

These were: his prompt moves, mentioned above, to set up accommodations with the other members of the European Community, which entailed the notion of Germany in a wider, and strong European Union; a special arrangement made with Hungary to help the border crossers; and his realisation that the moment was at hand, thanks especially to the demonstrations of emphatic public opinion in the GDR, to take power and secure reunification – illustrated through key incidents at Dresden and then Bonn. The West German state also assisted intimately in international dealings -- diplomatic juggling, deal-making and formal settlements the situation was demanding.

### **Agreement on the border crossers**

The West German government had struck an agreement with Hungary on opening its border, and assisting the travelers, at the end of August. Reasonably thorough reports came to light almost immediately of a visit to Bonn by the Hungarian Prime Minister, Miklos Nemeth, and Foreign Minister, Gyula Horn, though there were no announcements or briefings until after their return home. The government of Hungary said the emigration issue was a matter for the two Germanies; its own role was just to give helpful support. It received West German economic guarantees not disclosed until later, the sums withheld from journalists at the time; the financial side of the agreement could be inferred but not confirmed. The GDR classed it a “trade in humans”. Later Kohl would repeatedly thank the Hungarians for their courage in a crisis. Reportage of this sometimes elusive procedure included articles in *The Australian* 23.9.89, ABC Radio 17.9.89, *The Times* 15.9.89, and the *International Herald Tribune*, 26-27.8.89 and 11.9.89.

### **Going ahead towards reunification**

Kohl’s Ten-point Plan given to the Bundestag in November proposed an orderly and democratic movement towards reunification but without a timetable. It demanded an open democratic system in the GDR, and a model was offered for confederating the two republics, through the work of commissions in policy fields including the economy, environment, transport, technology, health and culture. All countries of Eastern and Central Europe that moved to adopt democratic systems might go into a widened European

Community – as it was to transpire. The GDR, moving from one “reform” administration to another, agreed to hold free elections in 1990.

This was a patient approach, but the West German Chancellor who had already denounced communism in the Bundestag as a “total failure”, immediately after the opening of the Wall, jettisoned that approach following his visit to Dresden on Tuesday 19.12.89 -- the day after the appearance of FRG flags in Leipzig. At Dresden there were more flags; crushing crowds shouted “we are one people”, and Kohl said, he felt impelled to utter the word “fatherland” in his address – to wild applause. He has not published a memoir but later gave extended interviews, including one (ABC RN 1999) in which he said the Dresden incident had decided him to press for reunification.

So, suddenly dropping “two Germanies” negotiations with the GDR, Kohl would bank on victory in the March elections in East Germany, then to move to reunification on the Bundesrepublik model in October 1990. Journalists attending a large gathering of East and West German Ministers at Bonn on 13.2.90, to discuss the joint commissions, were alerted to the change when no communique was offered. German journalists told that voting intention polls in the GDR had started indicating a conservative, pro-reunification landslide. The seventeen GDR Ministers returned home effectively empty handed; there was even equivocation over a prior agreement against deploying the Deutschmark in the East -- the reunified country would have the Deutschmark. Once again the unexpected turn in events was reported and explained from many media sources including, from Australia ABC Radio, and ABC TV 14.2.90.

### **International agreements and legal arrangements**

In the welter of diplomatic action in the last three months of 1989, Kohl achieved acceptance of the idea of a reunified Germany in the concept of a “Germany within Europe”. With chaos in East Germany from late November – government in paralysis, millions moving outside the country, rolling demonstrations virtually in every town -- a settlement was negotiated among the FRG and its European partners, the United States, the GDR and Soviet Union. There was summitry at Brussels, Malta, Paris and Strasbourg, and organisation of the “4+2” agreement -- to formally end the World War II settlement and division of Berlin among the former allies. At one crucial point in the decision-making on “4+2” Kohl met Gorbachev at Moscow; the US Secretary of State James Baker arriving there the next day, to help finalise instructions for officials of the six governments, gathered around a table in Berlin.

The United States had taken an early stand, that it did not share European apprehensions about Germany; would support the general idea of reunification within an expanded European framework, and would itself expect to remain with Germany in a restructured NATO. This was called the “Baker Doctrine” after a speech by Secretary Baker in Berlin on 12.12.89. “In reaffirming United States support for eventual German reunification President George Bush [GH Bush 1988-92] has sought to reduce British and French resistance to the growing international role of West Germany”, wrote an informed commentator (Fitchett, 28-29.10.89).

On the European side, President Francois Mitterrand acquired a pivotal role, achieving in direct talks with Kohl, notably at Bonn in early November, the famous “deal” whereby France would accept reunification and Germany would underwrite the Euro, by committing to the 1992 monetary union. He had received sufficient assurances about German intentions to be able to present a “soft French line” when, in his national role and as occupant of the rotational EC Presidency, he met President Bush at Martinique in December. He accepted Baker’s proposals on a future European “architecture”; recognising that a “proper balance” would be maintained using the EC institutional framework, and that the USA would not be decoupling itself from Europe. Therefore, in the world of institutional politics, the main steps towards achieving Germany’s reunification, harmoniously, were linked-in with the development of the European Community -- by the Century’s end, the new European Union.

### ***An die Freude ...an Ode to Joy***

The “Wall” announcement on Thursday night 9.11.89 was a sensation both because of its content and the manner of delivery by the politburo spokesperson, Gunter Schabowski. The present writer, there to report from the media conference, later described his disclosure of the decision to permit open access to the West, as “maladroit, performed by a spokesperson who did not appear to have a firm grasp on the information or its implications” (Duffield 2009 184). Even so the telecast event was grasped fully by East Germans who successfully began demanding to cross over, throughout the night. An exit permit system was set up but the border police detailed to hand out the cards were literally pushed aside in the rush. Equally, while there was astonishment among news media present, there was no doubt about the fact of what had taken place, reported on immediately and accurately as the historical milestone that it was. Some of the headlines are listed in Appendix 2.

A new Party politburo had been cobbled together and approved the decision at its first meeting, plainly seeking to stabilise the country, and so, to hold on to government. Public arguments emerged that the opening of the Wall had not really been intended, but Shabowski did stipulate, that officials had been instructed to grant all applications for the new permits. He said much later:

“After I’d been talking for about an hour I thought well the press conference is over and I nearly left out my final points. But I did remember and I began shuffling around in my papers, and as I did so, I looked up at the world’s press and said, oh yes and I want to inform you that the party has decided to open up the border to enable people to travel. After a second of stunned silence the questions started coming, and two questions made me hesitate. One journalist asked when, and I looked at my notes again and read out, with immediate effect. And then the second question was whether this included Berlin, and I had another moment of doubt because suddenly I realised we hadn’t informed the Soviets. But our draft had said that it was included so I just shut my eyes, plunged in head first, and explained that it did indeed include Berlin ... Well, I thought, it’s too late; the Soviets can’t do anything now anyway” (ABC Radio National, 1999).

Symbolism entailed in the events that followed, was telling. The spontaneous street party, a triumph of the human spirit, was international. The Wall, it transpired, was truly a hated thing among humanity. It could be expected that embedding a reunited Germany in a family of nations, the European Union, was well within the scope of the imagination of citizens. At the reunification ceremony less than one year later, 3.10.90, they waved thousands of German flags, and the European banner; the German music of that hour, the Ode to Joy (Beethoven 9, 4), was adopted as the anthem of the EU. The German President, Rikard von Weizsacker, saw the emerging order as multi-cultural and committed to an ethic of freedom: “Never before had I experienced an event taking place on German soil where so many people around the globe shared our joy ... There was complete unanimity among all political camps in Germany that after unification we wanted to be even more Europe-orientated and integrated than before” (In Herzog and Gilman 2001 5).

## Futures for news media

The 1989 experience was a test that demonstrated ways in which news media will operate as the “first draft of history”. Histories to date have not digressed from the range of facts and the interpretations being published in that year, as it all happened. News media today have developing technological strengths that may see this go further as a resource for knowledge. Accountability has grown with interactivity in the digital sphere and with the unprecedented daily public archiving of thousands of media products world-wide. Published journalism can be routinely and transparently retrieved, challenged and corrected; it is available to be studied by anybody, and so the news of the world is now a gigantic engine for research and understanding, a source of tested and testable information and thought. The model of 1989, when complex politics turned into a street party, and all had to be noted and explained, may be the precedent for the way that questions of history are to be grappled with in this Century.

## Futures for Europe

The European Union saw itself transformed by the change in the former Eastern bloc. Its Maastricht reforms would enable greater integration of the member states, and because of that, lives of Europeans in respect of many things, like the money they use, where they might go for a job, or what they might study, are shared. The new participants from the East came unheralded into that more integrated model. Because of the 1992 changes the “new” Europe would not be a loose customs union or a smaller “United Nations”, and the new players would not object. Divorce from the former Soviet Union, the occupying power, was one clear economic, political and also cultural motivation for Eastern Europe to change. Another was the drive to get rich; integrating with a prosperous European economy in the West would seem a legitimate, high priority to survivors of the years of insufficiency. As well, as people had been chanting in the streets, they needed freedom.

Since 1989 EU membership has grown from 12 to 27; taking in five new “Western” states and ten from the former Eastern bloc, *see* Appendix 3. The GDR was absorbed into membership through reunification. The enlargement has created economic costs in support for new member countries with their lower GDP; but the EU collectively accounts for some 30% of world gross national product; its population since 1989 has been increased by nearly 45% to 495-million; in land mass, omitting the former Soviet Union, it now accounts for the shape and virtual entirety of the map.

## Conclusion

This report on research initiated in 1989 concludes that mass media produced valid and highly instructive accounts of the historical change that took place. The narrative above draws heavily on the day by day work of the media. The report shows the media’s, and the world’s ready recognition of the main processes of German reunification and the creation of the expanded European Union; stimulated, with limited recognition at the time, by the other process of the failure of the Soviet Union. It finds that work done on histories since 1989 backs up the essential narrative and interpretative commentaries provided by the news media. A third source of information for this research, the set of reflective commentaries of journalists from the time, is an illuminating source from the perspective of participants in the field. The journalists’ contribution comes into its own in telling how facts are assembled. This is especially useful for understanding the character of a new kind of chronicle of life this Century– the flood of daily media, ever-accessible and kept on record.

The methodology employed in this research has proved appropriate for determining the significance of events and historical processes. The researcher was well-positioned as an observer, a journalist reporting in Europe during the crucial months. Reflection, then consultation with colleagues from the time, put a structure on the preserved impressions: news media had needed to play a double game, informal reporting of the catch-is / catch-can movement in the streets, and close monitoring of institutional politics and formal international diplomacy. The research has clarified ideas about the role of mass media and likely futures for media in a time of immense advances in information and communications technology. A powerful capacity to archive and index reportage by journalists that previously would be lost overnight, has provided an unprecedented opportunity to monitor and interpret historical events precisely and fast.

So the data gathering for the research was triangulated, using as well as the interviews, both the review of news published over the crucial period (July 1989 to January 1990) and histories written in the ten-years after November 1989. This approach has enabled the writer to present an interpretative narrative, establishing main themes, causes and effects. Significantly the compiled media accounts, looked at with hindsight, present themselves as the prime source, truly invaluable for establishing what occurred, why and with what impacts. The work done interviewing journalists became an important supplement to that review of their archived work. It would confirm aspects of the media narrative. Importantly it also served to explain the mentality deployed for news gathering, and how the

account comes together – the way facts will emerge and their significance become recognised.

Historical writing was being produced from the moments of the crisis, for example with the British writer Garton Ash shadowing the Czechoslovak dissidents as they planned their strategies, in the Velvet Revolution. Yet history perforce operates by interpreting, after the event. In this, the retrospective writing at each point has confirmed the hasty fact-production and interpretation given by the news media. There is an uncanny orthodoxy and absence of revisionism among all accounts, and kinds of accounts, of the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the historical processes attending that event. It was not always so, that the news record would be the main record; but the situation with pervasive media and precision information management today can make this occur – and as already noted, studies like the contribution of the panel of journalists in this case will add to understanding of the way it takes place

As the above short history has shown, the method deployed, using three sources, made it possible to identify, in an interpretative way how *key episodes* shaped the history (the Polish elections in June 1989; Gorbachev's visit to East Berlin in October; the meetings between West German and Hungarian heads of government over the "border crossers" from the GDRF; the incident of the decision not to impose a "Chinese" solution on the demonstrators in Leipzig; the Mitterrand-Kohl agreement on acceptance of both German reunification and the single market and the Euro).

Likewise *key personalities* were seen to be confronting their choices, (Gorbachev deciding not to maintain support for the satellite states; Kohl deciding in East Germany, in December, to move for reunification). *Major outcomes* have been documented through the media record. The 1992 expansion of the European Union, its joint currency and inclusion of the Eastern European states, is shown to be, at least in major part, the product of the events of 1989. German reunification was shown to be both a direct consequence, and intimately connected with the remaking of the EU. This research has also been able to help explain the collapse of the Soviet Union, as so much of Gorbachev's ultimately futile manoeuvring was carried out in Europe; the trail of facts entailed in the news of his activities there, connects with what is now known about the inevitable disintegration of the state apparatus. Again, the best of our knowledge of these phenomena, raw and refined, is from the news media, as the principal organised recording and documenting institutions active over the time in question. Their grand

compilation, checked against other accounts, which can be thorough, will have lasting use.

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## Appendix 1

### Media sources

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*The Guardian Weekly*, (*Manchester Guardian* edition), 75 Farrington Road, London EC1M 3HQ UK; all editions 1.8.89 – 31.1.90

*The International Herald Tribune*, (published with *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*), 181 ave Charles-de-Gaulle, 92200 Neuilly-sur-seine, France; daily editions 1.8.89 – 31.1.90

*The Times*, Times Newspapers Limited, London; daily editions 1.8.89 – 31.1.90

Australian Broadcasting Corporation, Ultimo, NSW. ABC Radio, news and current affairs; ABC Television news and current affairs; archive search of items by topic, 1.8.89 – 31.1.90

## Appendix 2

### News headlines

- “The Iron Curtain Torn Open: Berliners Cross the Wall to Freedom”, *TheTimes*, 10.11.89.
- “In a Gamble, a Symbol Falls”, *IHT*, 10.11.89.
- “The Berlin Wall Crumbles Into History”, *Guardian Weekly*, 19.11.89.
- “The Wall Comes Tumbling Down”, *The Australian*, 10.11.89.
- “After twenty-eight years the Berlin Wall has become an irrelevance”, ABC current affairs radio, AM, 10.11.89.
- “In an historic night in East Berlin tens of thousands of East Germans have breached the Wall which has divided their city for three decades”, ABC Television News, 19:00, 10.11.89.

## Appendix 3

### EU membership

- Belgium, Denmark, France, Greece, Germany (FRG), Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, The Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, United Kingdom (member states in 1989)
- Austria, Finland, Sweden (admitted in 1995)
- Cyprus, Malta (admitted in 2004)
- Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania (former Soviet republics admitted in 2004)
- Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia (former communist states admitted in 2004)
- Bulgaria and Romania (former communist states admitted in 2007)

This article was first prepared as a paper delivered at “Europe Twenty Years after the Fall of the Berlin Wall”, a conference of the National Centre for Research on Europe, Wellington, New Zealand, 3-4 November 2009.

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